

The background of the entire page is a photograph of a calm blue body of water, possibly a lake or a wide river. In the foreground, at the bottom of the frame, there are several tall, thin reeds or grasses with long, narrow leaves. Interspersed among the reeds are several bright yellow flowers, which appear to be poppies. The water has a subtle texture of small ripples.

# WALKING the WINDSONG

by  
LEA TASSIE

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Author Photo: Lynn Arnold

Three stories in this collection first appeared in another publication, as follows:

"A Proposal of Marriage", "Early Retirement", and "Running the Shale" in *Oddville Press*.

The nature of time is perhaps the greatest remaining mystery.  
(Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*)

For my McDonald's support group:

Alice, Barbie, Betty, Diane, Didi, Doug,  
Gary, Gord, Greg, John, Pat, Patti-Lyn,  
Rod, Ron, and Tony

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## A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

We walked up the driveway beneath the dappled shade of golden locust trees, listening to the drowsy murmuring of bees and cicadas. My twin's high heels wobbled over the gravel as she struggled to keep her balance. Under my boots, the stones ground against one another, squeaking in protest.

"I've made a decision, Cristobal," Marietta said. "I shall marry Aubrey and embrace a tranquil life. He seems gentle and I love his garden. It reminds me of the old fairy tales our parents read to us when we were small."

"I thought you came here only to look at my new country. I've never known you to take an interest in tranquility."

"A girl can change her mind, can't she?" Her glance was quick, but I had no trouble recognizing the stubborn set of her mouth. "I like Canada. I like the life Aubrey has here, the stillness he has around him." Her gaze now followed a green-gold leaf as it drifted down to the driveway. "But I will make him sweep up these messy leaves as they fall."

It's true that Aubrey's place feels like a haven. His house sits on a small rectangle of land at the end of a long, narrow driveway, and is surrounded by flower gardens and guarded on all sides by tall trees and shrubs. One cannot see the neighboring houses nor hear the noise of traffic out on the main road. The lush gardens make even me imagine I might catch a glimpse of elves weaving garlands of flowers under the giant hosta leaves. Except, of course, I do not believe in elves.

I said, "Aubrey shows no signs of wanting a wife."

"How would you know what he wants?" Marietta demanded. "You never look at anything but the cards."

My sister does not like facts which are at odds with her desires. I met Aubrey soon after I immigrated, and we understand each other well enough. I do not know his past history, only that he carries some tragic burden and that his aura of peace was not easily won. "I don't need to look at him. I know Aubrey well now."

I know my sister, too. I spent too much of my life in our tormented country trying to help her reach impossible goals and paying more than I could afford in bribes to get her out of trouble. Finally, I fled across the equator and half a dozen borders, hoping to find serenity in this northern rain forest.

Marietta gave me a disbelieving smile. "Suppose I commit an act of patriotism? If I assassinate the president, I'll need a refuge. Aubrey is a kind man; he would feel sorry for me, and he would want to save me from the firing squad. Besides, I am still attractive. Both of us would benefit."

I suppressed a shudder. "He may not believe in assassination nor that it would be a benefit."

"Don't quibble, Cristobal," she said. "I will convince him it is the only thing to do. Besides, I dream about it every night."

"Does the dream tell you how it will happen? The man who commits such an act will most certainly have fifteen minutes of fame before he dies."

"A woman would have more than fifteen minutes," Marietta said. "And she will not die if no one knows her real name." She tossed her head. "I am truly tempted to do it."

I heard a rustle behind me and glanced over my shoulder, a habit I have not managed to shake, in spite of living in safety for the past two years. But it was only a foraging squirrel and

the locust trees receded harmoniously into a gold-green tunnel behind us.

When we emerged into the front garden, Aubrey was sitting at the wrought iron table. His friend, Prunella, came out of the house with two decks of cards, a score pad, pencils, and a bottle of dandelion wine shining pale gold like the essence of sunlight.

Marietta sat down opposite Aubrey. "Are we going to be partners?"

"Suits me," he said, shoving his cowboy hat to the back of his head. "Saves cutting the cards."

"I wasn't thinking about bridge. I mean real partners. Like getting married."

The sun was shining in my eyes, but I could swear Aubrey went pale.

"You'd have to wash my socks," he said finally.

At the corner of the house, beneath the wisteria's drooping clusters of pale lilac blooms, bamboo wind chimes clacked with a faintly hollow sound and a small fountain, almost hidden by the giant hostas, whispered liquid music. Ranks of red impatiens and blue bachelor buttons nodded their heads.

Marietta said sharply, "I don't do socks."

A slight movement among the hostas caught my attention. A black jaguar glared from the dim shade provided by a giant leaf. The cat emerged from the lush growth, padded through the impatiens, and lay down on the gravel bordering the flowers. Its eyes were the pale yellow of the dandelion wine and the sleek fur glistened in the sunlight.

Marietta glanced at the cat, but immediately turned her attention back to the table and spread a deck of cards across the table. We cut for deal and Prunella, my partner by default, won with the highest card. She dealt, glanced at her cards, shrugged, and passed.

"I'll be forced to ask for refugee status if you won't marry me," Marietta said to Aubrey, her tone more conciliatory. "I intend to assassinate the president of my country."

"Well now, don't be too hasty," Aubrey said, removing his hat to smooth back his thinning hair. "We'll work something out. Can you make beet pickles?"

"I never learned how to cook," Marietta said, with a demure smile. "I lived with a poet, and we dined on iambic pentameter and moonlight."

She was going about this entirely the wrong way, as usual. She could easily have lied about the pickles. I glared at her until she said, "Oh, is it my turn to bid? One no trump."

I looked at my poor assortment of cards and passed.

Aubrey stared at the jaguar, then his cards, and chewed his bottom lip. His forehead glistened. "Two no trump."

"I make beet pickles all the time," Prunella said to Marietta.

She passed. So did Marietta.

I considered making a bid merely to interfere, but it was too risky. I led a card and Aubrey spread the dummy's hand on the table.

"Go get some glasses," Marietta said to Aubrey. "This wine is going to waste."

A growl so soft it was almost inaudible came from the jaguar.

"Listen to that!" Aubrey said. "She's ordering me around and we're not even married yet."

Marietta looked hopeful. "Does that mean you're considering it?"

"Not if you won't wash my socks." Aubrey ambled into the house and came back with two wine glasses.

"Who's not drinking?" Prunella gave me a suspicious look. "Don't tell me you've got a mickey of scotch in your jeans."

"I promise I won't tell you that," I said. "What I have in my jeans is my own business."



"I'm having a beer," Aubrey said, pulling a tall bottle from his back pocket. "It's Brazilian beer, made by Germans, and bottled in Canada. Which makes me a Renaissance kind of guy."

"I don't drink," Marietta said, handing me the glass of wine that Prunella had poured for her. "That's one of my saving graces. And I love it that you're a Renaissance man, Aubrey. That is truly romantic."

He said, "I bet you don't do windows either."

"Windows? Don't you hire people to do windows?"

"Not when I'm married," Aubrey said. "When I'm married, my wife cleans the windows. And washes my socks."

Marietta sighed. "You're making this really difficult. I'm seeking a refuge and ease for my soul, not a job." She made her contract of two no trump and picked up the other deck of cards while Prunella recorded the points scored.

Prunella took a delicate sip of wine as she watched Marietta deal.

I glanced toward the jaguar, but he was no longer lying in the sunshine. For a moment, I thought he had gone, but when my eyes had adjusted, I saw that he had merely moved into the shade to drink from the fountain under the bamboo chimes. "I didn't know you had a cat," I said to Aubrey.

"I don't. No one has a cat. Perhaps he has me."

I glanced back at the fountain, but the jaguar had disappeared. Perhaps to his cool lair under the leaves.

Marietta dealt. "Aubrey, I think we should discuss marriage in private. What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"Seven Tibetan monks will be here for dinner."

A yellow jacket landed on the rim of my wine glass, attracted by forbidden sweetness. I blew on him and he staggered to Prunella's side of the table. She swatted at him with the score pad and he came back to me.

I went into the house and, though it took me so long that I wondered if someone would notice and comment, came back with an ashtray. I sat down and lit a cigarette.

Prunella said, "Cristobal, for heaven's sake, will you stop fooling around and bid? I'm going to sleep here."

"Sorry, but I don't want to share my wine with this small black and yellow person." I blew cigarette smoke at the wasp, and he reluctantly headed for the wisteria. Then I looked at my excellent hand and bid two clubs.

"That's a demand bid!" Aubrey said. "You must have a big hand. I'll pass."

"Don't you have any good cards at all, Aubrey?" Marietta took a tissue from her pocket and carefully cleaned a speck of cigarette ash from the tablecloth.

"You dealt," Aubrey said. "If I don't have anything, it's your fault. And you can't even make beet pickles. Can you make kugel? My mother always made kugel for me."

"I can make kugel," Marietta said.

"That changes things," Aubrey said. "What do you put in it?"

"Rice, eggs and raisins."

"That's not kugel," Aubrey said, "that's rice pudding."

The jaguar, a sinuous flow of muscles, stepped out from under the hosta leaves and came to lie beside Aubrey's feet.

"How did your mother make kugel?" Marietta asked. "I don't mind doing it a different way."

Prunella said. "Two no trump." That was encouraging. It meant she had good cards, too.

Marietta put her cards down, looking bored.

"Six no trump," I said. Making a small slam would be very pleasant. I do not care about the points, but Prunella would be delighted.

Aubrey passed and said, "Potatoes and onions, grated. And eggs, of course."

"Is that all? Just potatoes and onions?" Marietta said. "That's not sweet."

Prunella swatted at the yellow jacket again. His darting flight, as he circled the table, betrayed irritation. If he stung the jaguar, we would be in trouble. If he stung Marietta, even bigger trouble.

"It's not supposed to be sweet," Aubrey said.

"If I make it with potatoes and onions," Marietta said, "will you marry me?"

"I'll think about it," Aubrey said. "I'd have to taste the kugel first, of course."

"Then we're engaged," Marietta said. "I know you'll like my kugel."

"I hope you made the right bid, Cristobal," Prunella said. "It's not easy to take twelve tricks."

"Life is full of risks," I said. "It's your lead, Marietta."

Marietta led the ace of hearts.

Aubrey moaned, then swallowed the last of his beer and put the bottle down firmly on the side table. "You're not supposed to lead an ace against a slam contract."

Marietta's bottom lip quivered. "You're not supposed to yell at your fiancée for playing the wrong card. I'd cancel the whole deal if it wasn't a matter of life and death. I suppose you would enjoy seeing me executed."

I laid my hand down for the dummy, saw Prunella smile, and knew we were going to make the contract.

"It's okay with me if you cancel," Aubrey said. "This marriage thing was your idea in the first place."

"I won't make you any kugel."

"Well, don't be too hasty. It's a long time since I had kugel."

"A whole week, at least," Prunella muttered.

"I take it we're engaged again," Marietta gazed at her hand. "What should I lead now?"

"You're not allowed to ask your partner for direction," I said.

"You change the rules every time we play," Marietta led a small heart.

"Would you like a drink?" Aubrey said to Marietta. "There's a jug of iced tea in the refrigerator."

Marietta rose. "Cristobal, play my hand for me. I'll get the tea."

I slid into her chair and picked up her cards, hoping I wouldn't be tempted to cheat and make a bad play. I needn't have worried; her cards were worthless.

When Marietta returned, so did the wasp. I lit another cigarette in an attempt to defend myself against its bad temper.

"Aubrey, I don't want a real marriage, just the legality. I want to live here, where I'll be safe," Marietta said. "Does that make you feel better?"

Aubrey put his cards down. "You don't want me? You just want the convenience? Your words are wounding. I may cry."

The jaguar rose and stared at Marietta. He was panting.

"It's your turn to play a card, Aubrey," Prunella said. "And if you don't hurry up, you'll have another cause for tears."

Marietta reached over to pat Aubrey's hand, and I managed to knock her glass of iced tea across the table. Prunella grabbed the cards; I grabbed the wine glasses. Marietta scrunched the

tablecloth into a ball. "Oh, this is terrible," she said. "I hate messes."

"You can put the tablecloth in the laundry room," Aubrey said.

"That little room you wouldn't let me see when you showed me through the house?" asked Marietta. "I've been dying to look in there."

"It's only a laundry room," Aubrey said. "There is nothing to see but my dirty socks. Which you have refused to wash."

Marietta ignored his words and went into the house, Prunella put the cards back on the bare wrought iron table.

A moment later, Marietta came back, her face pale. "I never saw such a stinking mess in my life. I suppose your closet is in the same condition?" She slumped into her chair. "I don't think I will marry you after all."

"Do you mean it's all over between us?" Aubrey said. He looked at his empty beer bottle as if hoping it might refill itself.

"We made the slam, Cristobal," Prunella said, gathering up the cards. "Six no trump, doubled and redoubled."

I couldn't remember Aubrey or Marietta doubling the contract, and I'd have noticed if Prunella redoubled, but she always tallies the score and I have found it wiser not to question her figures.

I picked up my glass. The wasp floated in the last inch of sunshine wine, his wings too wet to lift him to safety. I stuck my finger beneath him so he would have something to stand on and took him over to the wisteria, where he crawled onto a branch and began shaking his wings and cleaning himself.

"I'm leaving," Marietta said. "I feel a migraine coming on."

"I'll walk out to the street with you," Prunella said. She sighed. "I'm so disappointed. I was looking forward to a long, stimulating afternoon of bridge."

"So was I. And looking forward to getting a husband, too," Marietta said. "But men can be so uncooperative. Don't you agree?"

The two women disappeared beneath the spreading branches of the golden locust trees, their voices fading. Then came the thud of car doors closing and the sound of engines starting. Aubrey went into the house and came back with another Renaissance beer.

I tipped the last of the dandelion wine onto the grass for the yellow jacket and poured two fingers from the mickey of scotch I had in my jeans. Now that Marietta had taken the car, I would be forced to walk to my apartment, but I have endured worse.

"Was Marietta serious about marrying me?" Aubrey asked.

"She's serious about everything."

The jaguar padded over to the fountain for another drink of water, then disappeared under the hosta leaves.

Aubrey gazed up at the canopy of blue sky for a couple of minutes. "Perhaps I should go visit my brother in Alberta."

"She's flying south on Wednesday. Only three more days."

He turned his gaze to me. "When you went into the house for the ashtray, did you happen to go into the laundry room?"

"I'll clean up the mess."

He smiled. "I was surprised to see that most of my compost pile had decided to move indoors. It rarely does that." Then he was serious again. "Do you think Marietta will really assassinate the president?"

"She's capable of it. But they may not let her back into the country."

"What will you do if that happens?"

"Perhaps I can go to Alberta with you."

I put my feet up on a wrought iron chair and leaned back, letting the sun bake the knots of tension from my muscles. The wasp came to examine my scotch, rejected it and dove on the dandelion wine in the grass. I heard a soft rumbling purr but could not decide whether it was the jaguar or the happy breath of a now peaceful afternoon.



## WATER DANCE

On Spring Mountain,  
snowmelt sluices old channels,  
spray-dances down rock faces,  
spreads rainbow glitter in sunlit air.

Tasting of glaciers,  
River plunges to the valley,  
tumbles with sister streams,  
then slows  
to linger in broad pools,  
flowing silent past sinuous willows.  
The flooded grass sways,  
dancing in the sun-shot depths.

Last year's alder leaf drifts,  
catches on tufts of old grass,  
stumbles into the current,  
spins away south.

Sister Rivers join,  
swelling the flow, swelling the song,  
rolling over green reeds,  
yearning toward the sea.

River bends, shifts, glides,  
lit within by the silver scales of fish  
darting like shards of drowned sun.  
River slides sweetly over polished gravel  
flowing pebble by pebble into the sea.

Sea flows, moon-caught, shore to shore,  
weaving among islands,  
shifting sand, carving continents,  
while clouds drink wave-flung spray.

On Autumn Mountain,  
snow falls.

## SHOOTOUT AT BILLIEBUCKS

Billie McGillicuddy herself stood behind the bar when I walked in on Saturday morning. For a minute I couldn't figure out what was different, then I realized that her short, thick, wavy, gray hair was now a rich brown with a reddish cast to it. I decided maybe the right word was auburn. I thought of asking her why she'd messed with her hair color, but the answer was none of my business. Anyway, there was something else I wanted to know. "What's with the sign in the window?"

She finished setting up the last coffee machine and turned to the counter where I'd plunked down on my usual stool. "Morning, Pete! Karen says the first day of October is National Coffee Day. She decided we should do something to celebrate the tradition."

I raised my eyebrows. "Tradition? I never even heard of it."

"Neither had I," Billie admitted. "It only started a couple of years ago."

"That's not a tradition then. That's not even a habit."

"If coffee drinkers are like cats, it could be classified as tradition." Billie smiled. "You know Tigger? Well, that cat got his first good brushing about two years ago and he liked it so much he instantly decided it was a 400-year-old tradition and that life simply could not go on unless he got brushed every day."

"Is this competition another one of Karen's hare-brained schemes for promotion?"

Billie pushed a mug across the counter to me. Black, bitter, and plain, like I've had nearly every morning since she opened BillieBucks twenty years ago. None of that fancy stuff for me. I like my coffee to be coffee. Period.

"Naturally it was her idea," Billie said. "Like my hair. I saw you looking."

Karen was Billie's niece. She had a shiny new degree in marketing and was working at Billie's because she couldn't get a job anywhere else in town. Billie didn't need her, but she's always been soft on family.

"What's the color of your hair got to do with the price of coffee beans?"

Billie sighed. "Karen says people will give me more respect if I look younger."

"Since when are young people supposed to get more respect than old people?"

"Since some people decided that if your hair is gray, you're old, and if you're old, you have to be losing your mind along with everything else you've got." Billie sounded a little bitter and I didn't blame her. She was no more than sixty, same as me, and a damn good businesswoman.

The coffee aroma drifting upward enticed me to take the first sip and heave an appreciative sigh. That first kick of caffeine is always the best. "Why don't you encourage Karen to move to the city and find a job there?"

Billie served two more early customers and came back. "You know her boyfriend works here. That's the only reason she isn't rushing off to conquer the city. She says my place needs jazzing up and that once she's doubled the number of customers, I'll actually need her." She shook her head. "Four years of college in the city have changed that girl and I don't like it. She may be right in what she says about promoting this place, but I really don't like that either. It worries me."

I knew Karen's boyfriend, Roger, who was articling with the local lawyer. I waited while Billie served Mrs. Hardy and asked after Mrs. Hardy's dog, Ruff, who'd been in the animal hospital for three days now.

When Billie was finished listening to the problems of the Hardy household, I said, "How is

Karen going to double the number of customers? This is a small town and you run the only coffee specialty place there is. Some people just aren't into coffee."

At that point, Karen came dashing in the back door, a blue and white striped apron wrapped around her slender body, and her long black hair pulled back into a bouncy ponytail. "Good morning, Madam Barista," she chirped, "why aren't you wearing your badge of office?"

"Oh, Karen, really!" Billie looked irritated. "There are no badges of office for running a coffee shop."

Karen threw her arms out in mock horror. "This is not a coffee shop, Aunt Elizabeth. It's a specialty coffee house. You make lattes and espressos and mochas and blended coffees and dozens of other brews that nobody else serves."

"Why are you calling me a barista?" Billie demanded. "And why Elizabeth? I've always been 'Billie' to everybody, including you."

"Because those names are more up-market," Karen said, "more indicative of who you are and how far you've come. You should be wearing the apron for the same reason." She glanced around. "Where is it, by the way?"

"Hanging in the storeroom," Billie said.

Karen turned and hurried toward the back of the building. Billie said to me, in a low voice, "You asked about getting new customers. Karen wants me to start doing sandwiches, too, to compete with the three cafés in town."

"Wouldn't that just turn this place into an ordinary café? Besides, one of those giant oatmeal cookies you sell fills me up just like a sandwich."

"How do I know she isn't right? Maybe I am behind the times." Billie sighed. "Oh, Pete, it's hard to say no to her. She's so enthusiastic and so full of energy."

"And full of screwy ideas," I said, pushing my mug across for a refill. Maybe I had no right to say that, but Billie and I have been friends for a long time and neither of us has ever held back on saying what we think. Besides, this was not the first time I'd watched Billie being used by one of her blood relations.

By the time Billie poured me that essential second mugful, Karen had come back and coaxed her aunt to put on the blue and white striped apron. Then the regulars started coming in to line up for their morning shot of caffeine. Billie had a smile and a 'how are you' for everybody, while Karen brewed and poured.

When there was a lull, I overheard Karen whisper to Billie, "You don't need to spend all that time gossiping with people. A pleasant smile is all they're entitled to." She gave me kind of a dirty look, then turned away. I knew what she was thinking, that I take up too much of her aunt's time. Tough beans, I thought. Tough coffee beans.

I finished my coffee. I could agree with Billie that Karen sparkled with energy. Also, she was a good-looking girl with a brain, though perhaps not much common sense. But it seemed to me that her sparks of energy bounced off people instead of warming them.

"What time is the competition?" I asked.

"Eleven o'clock," Karen said. "Oh, it's going to be a blast! What happens is that I ask a question about coffee or its history and whoever comes up with the right answer gets a mug of our special new brew."

"I didn't know you had a new coffee."

"See?" Karen said to her aunt. "I told you nobody'd know unless we did something dramatic." She turned back to me. "It's a delicious new taste; rich and fulfilling, and it's called Mocha Dreamtime."

They could have put a sign on the blackboard menu that hangs above the end of the counter. Or a picture in the window. But what do I know?

Karen chirped, "Do come on back for it, Pete. Bring a friend!"

"I will."

And I would. Not the kind of friend who would ever buy a coffee, but that wasn't my problem. In the meantime, I'd wander down to my office and put in a couple of hours. Saturdays are good days for catching up.



I returned to BillieBucks five minutes before eleven and found the place so crowded that I had to squeeze to get inside the front door. I guess a lot of people figured winning a free coffee wouldn't be that tough. There were only two laptops in sight and just one person reading the newspaper.

"I'm glad you made it back, Pete," Billie said.

Karen hushed her. "I'm starting the contest in a minute. Aunt Elizabeth, you'll be working the till."

That would give me a chance to repay Billie for some of the free coffee I've drunk over the years. "Well, how about I volunteer to pour and deliver? Sounds like you need a third pair of hands."

Karen looked surprised. "You're right. Wait a minute. Hold your hands out."

I did so. Was she worried I might have dirty nails?

But she smiled. "That's fine. You don't seem to have any tremor at all yet."

I might have a tremor after I'd whacked her ass a few times. "Nope, none. Never dropped a mug or spilled a drop in my entire life." Which wasn't strictly true, but nobody notices stuff like that unless you're overly dramatic about dropping things.

I just had time to move behind the counter and get ready before Karen started talking. She'd probably call it 'working the crowd.' She announced the contest and described it, along with waving hands, flashing eyes, and a wide smile. I had to admit she was pretty good with the public speaking.

"And now," she trilled, "here's the first question. When was instant coffee invented?"

"Whoa! Bad words!" a male voice called. I recognized it as coming from Karen's boyfriend, Roger, down at the far end of the room. "I bet you don't even allow instant coffee in this place, or decaf either."

The young guy with Roger said, "If you're going to drink decaf, you might as well take the spaghetti out of spaghetti and meat balls or serve hamburgers without a patty."

Had Karen coached them? Or was I being overly suspicious? But my instincts are usually pretty good.

After a few chuckles and muted comments from the customers, Karen said, "Nobody knows? Well, I'm not surprised. It appeared first in England back in 1771."

"My goodness!" said Mrs. Jakes. "Who'd ever have thought it was that old? Or that it could have lasted this long?"

Karen went on. "All right, here's the next question. Tell me, what famous musician adored coffee and insisted that each cup be made with exactly 60 beans?"

Roger, the boyfriend, stood up. "Beethoven!"



Yep, she'd coached him all right.

"Ta da! You won a free coffee!" Karen flung her arms wide in triumph.

I poured the Mocha Dreamtime and took the mug to him. He swallowed a mouthful and closed his eyes in ecstasy. "Oh, this is fantastic!"

He was overdoing it, but perhaps Karen had taught him to be a drama enthusiast too.

Karen next asked where most coffee was produced. One woman suggested it was Columbia, but the young guy with Roger said, "Brazil."

"Right!" Karen caroled. "Pete, take a free mug of Mocha Dreamtime to Donald."

He reacted to the new coffee the same way Roger had. It was good, of course, since I'd made sure of that, but I didn't think it was *that* good. And by now I'd recognized Donald. With that red hair, he had to be Jake and Sally Arnold's son, and that, of course, meant he was being groomed to eventually take over Jake's grocery store. From the way he acted, you'd have thought he already owned not only the store but the whole village.

"Question number four," Karen announced. "There are two types of coffee beans. Can anybody tell me what they are?"

At least Roger and Donald were well enough coached to let some silence go by. When it didn't look like anybody else had an answer, Roger said, "Arabica and Robusta."

"Very good!" Karen beamed at him. "You're really up on your coffee knowledge. Arabica is the most popular, but Robusta has the most caffeine."

I took the boy another Mocha Dreamtime and he slurped with real enthusiasm.

Karen looked around the crowded room. It was obvious she wanted someone else to answer a question and win a mug of coffee and I was curious to see how she handled it. I didn't think it had occurred to her that most people drink coffee because they like the taste, not because they know anything about it.

"I was going to ask when coffee was first used as a beverage," Karen said, "but since that's not common knowledge, let me tell you the answer."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw young Donald opening his mouth, and Roger elbowing him.

"According to legend," Karen said, "it was in ninth century Ethiopia. Goat herders noticed that their goats leapt around, like they were dancing, after eating coffee berries."

Donald leapt up, in a way that reminded me of those dancing goats. "And then a local monk experimented with making a drink from the coffee berries and found out it kept him awake at night."

Karen's smile was wide but forced. "Give that man another Mocha Dreamtime!"

I complied at once. Donald tucked into his second mug with as much enthusiasm as Roger had shown for his. He and Roger were both grinning happily.

When I went back behind the bar, Billie muttered to me, "I had a feeling this wasn't going to work. She's asking questions nobody will know the answers to. And I'm running out of old-fashioned donuts." She headed for the storeroom. "Be right back."

Before she returned, Roger and Donald arrived at the counter. Roger said, "Can we have another two of those Mocha Dreamtimes? That taste is so great I'm even willing to pay for it."

I kept my mouth shut while I took their money and gave them the drinks. By the time Billie was back in the saddle, Karen was asking her next question.

"Is coffee addictive?"

From a small table beside one of the windows, Marcia Hartnell, one of the nurses at the local hospital, answered. "One small cup of coffee a day will hook most people."

"Congratulations!" Karen burbled. "You're right, of course. Pete?"

I called from the bar, "Room for cream?"

Marcia nodded yes and I took a mug of Mocha Dreamtime over to her, along with the cream jug.

Karen was on her promotion kick before I even got back to the bar. "Yes, coffee is addicting, but everyone likes its rousing effects. With just a small amount of caffeine, your brain, your blood vessels, muscles, and your digestion become more efficient. Caffeine can heighten your athletic ability, alertness, and cognition, too."

Roger stood up, none too steadily. "Coffee isn't a drug, it's a vitamin."

Karen, to do her credit, looked worried. She glanced around the room. "Tell me, is it possible to OD on coffee?"

It was the nurse who answered, of course. Marcia said, "I don't know about that, but if you drink too much, you'll suffer from wakefulness and possibly panic attacks."

"Oh, but I'll bet nobody here ever drinks too much coffee," Karen caroled. "Coffee is a delicacy, a treat. It's best to savor each mouthful and let it work its magic slowly." She looked at her competition notes. "Anyway, it would take more than a hundred cups to provide a lethal dose of caffeine."

"Bet I could drink a hundred cups of coffee!" Roger was on his feet, swaying dangerously. The woman at the table next to his backed her chair away, looking nervous. He staggered to the bar, a ten-dollar bill in his hand. "Two more of those Mocha whatnots for me and my bud over there!" He waved his arm in a direction that might have meant Donald, and knocked an apple fritter off the 'day-old' plate of goodies that Billie always kept at the front of the bar, beside the cash register.

"Roger, are you drunk?" Billie demanded.

Roger stared at her belligerently. "Of-of course not! What an insulting sing to thay! Can I have my coffee?"

Billie looked at me. "Pour the coffees, Pete. The customer is always right."

Roger picked up the apple fritter, inspected it, and threw it at Donald, who was at the other end of the room. "Here ya go, buddy. This one's on me!" His aim was amazingly good for somebody who looked like he could barely stand up. The fritter hit Donald full in the face. The apple filling slid gently over his chin and down inside his open shirt, leaving a meandering trail like that of a garden slug.

Donald stood up. "Hey, you asshole! You can't d-do that to me!" He started heading for the front of the bar, but tripped over his chair. When he tried to steady himself on the neighboring table, he knocked it over, dumping half-full cups of coffee on the floor. The people who'd been sitting there jerked away from his path and backed into a second table, which teetered, but managed to remain upright.

Donald grabbed a chair and, in a movement that made everyone go silent in shock, smashed in the display case containing Billie's assortment of sweet goodies. Shattered glass sprayed into the case and over the floor. Donald grabbed an apple fritter and staggered back to his table. He swung around, aiming at Roger. "Good choice! Fritters at forty feet! Best man gets a free coffee!"

His aim wasn't as good as Roger's. The fritter sailed past Roger's head and slopped down the front door.

"You're a lousy shot!" Roger bellowed, and grabbed a couple of double chocolate chunk brownies from the smashed display case. He heaved one at Donald, but that missed, too, landing

in somebody's coffee mug and spraying hot liquid everywhere.

I was still standing at the counter, stunned. The only thing I could think to say was, "My God! This beats the gunfight at the O.K. Corral!"

"Well, come on, Wyatt Earp! Do something!" Billie's tone was urgent.

I looked at the two young guys heaving pastry at each other and other patrons trying to get out of the line of fire. A few were managing to escape to the outdoors.

There are some advantages to growing older; you learn to stay out of fights you can't win. I hauled out my cell and phoned the cops.

They were there in three minutes, of course; the cop shop is just in the next block. In another two minutes, Roger and Donald were in handcuffs and being shoved, none too gently, into the back of the cruiser. Karen was out on the sidewalk arguing with the law, but it didn't look like she was having any success.

Customers began to come back in, walking carefully. "Anything we can do, Billie?" Myron Blakeston asked. "Those boys made a real mess."

'Mess' was an understatement. The place was littered with trampled food, broken glass, smashed mugs, and overturned tables.

Karen marched in through the frittered front door. "I don't understand what went wrong."

Billie stood up on the short wooden stool she keeps behind the counter. "Sorry about the confusion and the mess, folks," she called. "Come back tomorrow and have a free coffee on me. And don't worry about the mess; Karen and I will clean up. Just be careful not to step in the glass or pastry on your way out."

"Me?" Karen looked at her aunt. "This mess isn't my fault! I can't help it if Roger and his buddy came in here drunk! We need to hire a cleaner to do it. Here, give me the phone book. I'll phone somebody."

Billie climbed down from her stool and grabbed Karen's wrist. "My dear sweet niece, whose idea was it to order the new Mocha Dreamtime coffee?"

Karen looked surprised. "Mine, of course."

"And whose idea was it to hold a competition?"

"Mine," Karen said.

"And," said Billie, "whose idea was it to prime Roger and Donald with the correct answers?"

Karen tried, without success, to jerk her wrist loose. "All right, mine. But they were just supposed to start the ball rolling. After the first three or four questions, I was going to make them really easy."

"And it didn't work, did it?" Billie's tone was cold steel.

Karen hung her head. "No."

"Then get some garbage and recycle bags and start cleaning up."

I decided it was time I said something. Before I could, Billie looked at me and said, "Yes, you can help if you like, Marshall Earp."

Amazing how that woman can read minds. I wondered just how much of mine she'd perused.

We were almost done when Stu Giverns, my next-door neighbor and expert carpenter, came to remove the rest of the glass from the display case. He measured the opening. "Well, Billie, it'll be a week or so before I can get this replaced. Is that okay?"

Billie looked tired, but she smiled at him. "Don't have a lot of choice, do I?" She patted him on the arm. "That will be fine, Stu. I'll just display a few desserts at a time, so they won't dry out."

Karen was on her knees beside a bucket of water, cleaning the floor. She looked up. "Oh, you can't do that, Aunt Elizabeth! You need to put out all the desserts you can, so the display looks rich and enticing. A wealth of tastes and sensations to draw the customers."

Billie gave the girl another of those cold steel looks. "And have any of your other ideas worked?"

Karen stuck out her lower lip. "No. But..."

"I know what you're going to say," said Billie. "You're going to say you learned all this stuff in college and it works in the city and therefore it must be right. Just take the weeks you've spent here at my coffee house as experience and use it in your next job."

"My next job?"

"Yes, dear," Billie said. "You tried, and I appreciate it. But you're fired."

Stu Giverns put the last shards of glass into a cardboard box. "Maybe I should go into the fuel business instead of the building business. Researchers have had a big success in converting coffee into biodiesel."

Billie looked at Karen. "I'm glad you didn't bring up that subject during the competition."

Karen was standing up now, looking as if she might cry. "But, Aunt Billie, what am I going to do?"

"I don't know, dear," said her aunt. "You're a grownup now. You figure it out." She gave the girl a hug. "Run along home. I have to make a list of what I'll need from the bakery tomorrow morning."

While Billie was locking the front door behind Karen, I slipped into the back and hid the empty bottle that had contained over-proof brandy in the bottom of the garbage pail. When I turned to go back out front, I realized Billie was watching me. Had she seen the bottle? My heart dropped into my shoes. Would I get fired, too?

But Billie said, "Take a pew. There's enough dark roast left in the pot for one mug each." She poured the coffee.

"There's an old Turkish proverb," I offered, "that says coffee should be black as hell, strong as death, and sweet as love."

She smiled and clinked her mug with mine. "That's how I always brew dark roast." She put her hand over mine. "Thanks for the push, Wyatt."



## THE TEN O'CLOCK NEWS

The kitchen was on the Alberta side of the border, and convenient for Jennifer since she did the cooking. Naturally, she used the second bedroom, also on the Alberta side. The living room and the master bedroom were on the British Columbia side of the border, which was Graham's part of the house. This meant he had dibs on the big television set, though Jennifer shrugged that off because they couldn't get many programs, anyway, and she could easily make do with the small set. The dining room straddled the border, fortunately, so that they could eat together, though there were times when neither of them thought this could be called fortunate. Nor did they like to think that they were actually eating together, since on the Alberta side, with Mountain Standard Time, dinner was at six o'clock for Jennifer, but on the BC side, with Pacific Standard Time, it was at five o'clock for Graham.

The couple had had a serious fight two years previously and partitioned the house so they could both still live in it rather than go their separate ways. Jennifer now couldn't remember what the fight was about, but she refused to ask Graham. That would be admitting weakness. It would have been weakness to leave, too, and head back south to her family. After all, they both wanted to farm and had put equal amounts of money into the down payment on the land, and both worked full time on running the farm.

They didn't share all the tasks equally because that isn't always the most efficient way of handling the various kinds of work necessary on a farm. Graham took care of the haying and fences; Jennifer took care of the vegetable garden and the cooking. However, they shared the dairy cows, six each, and took turns delivering milk to the two nearest settlements. It was fortunate, in terms of the quarrel, that the barn, like the dining room, was split down the middle. Jennifer's six cows lived on the Alberta side; Graham's six lived on the BC side.

The arrangement was reasonably convenient, considering the circumstances, but it had drawbacks. Graham wanted life to return to how it had been before the fight, but that would mean mentioning the fight, and he couldn't remember what they'd fought about. He certainly wouldn't ask Jennifer. Being a woman, she'd remember, of course. They always wanted the last word. Perhaps that made up for being smaller and weaker physically. He had to admit, though, that she was as strong-minded as any man.

"I don't see what's wrong with living this way," Jennifer said, as she sat down at the dining table at six o'clock and pushed his plate halfway across the provincial border. "We're only an hour apart. Imagine what it would be like if we lived on the International Date Line. I'd get the ten o'clock news a whole twenty-four hours before you!"

"It wouldn't make any difference, as far as I can see," said Graham. He pulled the plate the rest of the way to his five o'clock place setting. "The last time I asked if I could spend the night with you, you said no because I'd lose an hour if I crossed to your side. And you wouldn't come over to my side, even though it meant you'd gain an hour."

Jennifer shrugged. "What's the point of even trying? We couldn't get together anyway, no matter which side we used, because we're an hour apart. You can't make love to thin air."

He scowled at her. "You're talking to me at ten after six, your time. But I can hear you just fine, and it's only ten after five on my side of the table."

"I don't think sound has any boundaries."

"Obviously heat doesn't either," Graham said. He'd just burnt his mouth on the mashed potatoes. "You know what, Jen, I don't think time is as important as you're making out. Say you

ask me what time it is on Andromeda. There's no sensible answer to that. So maybe there isn't any sensible answer to it on Earth."

Her eyes widened. "Don't they have time on Andromeda?"

"How would I know? I've never been there. The Andromeda galaxy is two and a half million light years from here."

"I'm sure they must have time," Jennifer said. "I'm sure time is everywhere. And I looked up the details on that galaxy after you said you saw it in the night sky last fall. And the article said that Andromeda is approaching the Milky Way galaxy at a speed of sixty-eight miles per second. So, if the scientists know that figure, then Andromeda must have time."

Graham put down his fork. "I'm not so sure. I think time is a just a construct. It was created by humanity to measure things."

"Well, we needed it when we were starting out," Jennifer said. "Our ancestors found that agriculture was based on the seasons. To get the biggest harvests, they had to know how the sun and stars moved and when the movements changed."

"I don't agree." Graham shook his head. "I can tell when spring has arrived without a calendar. All I have to do is note when wild plants start coming up, and when the air gets warmer. I don't need a clock to tell me when the spring equinox happens. I can figure that out by watching where the sun comes up on the horizon."

"But you wouldn't know *exactly* when it happens."

"I don't need to know the exact time," Graham said. "A week this way, or a week that way, it doesn't matter as long as I get the seed in the ground after the last frost. The equinox may announce spring according to the rules humanity has determined, but that doesn't guarantee that the temperature won't go below freezing again."

Jennifer rose and put her plate in the sink. "It's time we milked the cows."

"You always change the subject when you've lost a point."

She ignored him. Graham always gloated when he won an argument. But his plate certainly wouldn't get washed unless he pushed it back across the border to Alberta.

The cows were used to being milked at seven a.m. and again at seven p.m. Jennifer's cows were on the Alberta side, so she used the milking machine first, since Graham didn't need it for another hour. The system worked well because they didn't have to cooperate on the various tasks involved. Daylight saving time was about to happen, when everybody 'leapt forward' and lost an hour of time, but the system even worked well then.

That first year, they had agreed to accommodate the cows' sense of time, since the animals got upset when routine wasn't followed. Thus, when time leapt ahead one hour, and the cows' seven a.m. became the humans' eight a.m. with the same thing happening in the evening, they did the milking at eight. In the fall, when they returned to Standard Time, they milked at seven in both provinces, the usual hour apart.

Doing this was sometimes a nuisance, Jennifer thought, as she filled the mangers with hay and remembered the complaints about milk getting to town an hour later than usual, but that was still easier than listening to the bawling of twelve cows. She patted each of her six 'girls' after unhooking the milking machine, and stood for a moment enjoying the sounds of their contented munching of hay.

Graham said the extra hour provided by switching from daylight saving time was just a trick of the clock, that time was based on illusions people created in their own minds. But he was wrong. In springtime, when the clocks went ahead, she always lost an hour of sleep.

Jennifer heard Graham go out a moment after she came in. During the hour he was in the

barn, she washed the dinner dishes, prepped the coffee pot, and tried to think of ways to counter his argument that time wasn't important. When the back door slammed, she turned the coffee pot on and prepared to do battle.

"Graham, think about how people live," she said, pushing his mug of coffee across the border. "Some of the first things children learn are the meanings of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. That's basic."

"Sure," he said, deciding it was time to give a little. "Also, the words past, present, and future."

What was he up to now, actually agreeing with her? But she went on. "We think of time as real. We're always saving time or trying not to waste it. We say we'll make time for something we like to do, or when we need a break, we call a time-out. We talk about time flying or slowing to a crawl. But we always know the real time when we look at our watches or clocks. And all that proves that time is real and important."

"No, it doesn't," Graham said. "The only thing it proves is that humans decided that measuring time was a good way to measure other things. Society makes sure we believe time is important. But time would go by just as relentlessly even if we had no clocks to mark its passing."

"Maybe time doesn't pass," Jennifer said. "Maybe it stays still, and we pass through it." She liked to throw him a curve now and then, even she wasn't sure what she meant.

"How would I know? What does time feel like when you pass through it? The big puzzle is that time is mysterious and yet we act as if we know what it is and are intimate with it. As far as I can tell, it has no color, odor, taste, shape, or form. It's only the idea of it that drives us. If you tried to grab a chunk of it and hand it to me, you couldn't."

Jennifer stirred more sugar into her coffee. "You don't understand. Because you don't pay any attention to it, you pretend that time isn't important."

"Don't exaggerate! I know when to plant seeds, when to harvest the hay, when to milk the cows. I know when the coffee's on, too."

"But, Graham, time is everywhere! It's real, it's true. Look at all our digital watches, cell phones, and so on."

"We don't have cell phones; you know there are no cell towers this far north."

"Don't be petty! Like I was saying, we have all these timepieces and computers, and electronic networks that connect people all around the world. And these rely on signals from atomic clocks synchronized to billionths of a second."

"Big deal!" He was getting irritated. Why couldn't she think outside the box?

"It *is* a big deal! You like watching swimming in the Olympics. You know that a hundredth of a second can mean the difference between a gold medal and a silver."

Graham sighed and pushed his mug across the border. "Can I have a refill, please?"

She poured fresh coffee for him. Tomorrow, she'd get him to push his sugar bowl over to Alberta so she could refill that, too.

"Okay," Graham said, "have you heard of attoseconds?"

She shook her head no.

"Physicists use that measurement for certain events. And these events happen so fast you couldn't possibly be aware of them. One hundred attoseconds is to one second as one second is to 300 million years."

"I can't even comprehend something that small. Or that big." She was sure her head would explode if she tried. "Look, let me tell you how I feel about time. It must exist because of cause

and effect, because of change. I plant a seed in the garden, and it grows. I pour coffee in a mug, then I drink it. None of that can happen backwards."

"You're right," Graham said. "We see time as flowing in one direction, like a river, leading from events that happened in the past toward the future, which is unknown."

Jennifer rose and turned on the little TV on the kitchen counter. "It's time for the ten o'clock news. I always like to hear what the weather will be tomorrow."

"If you just wait until tomorrow, you can find that out for yourself."

"Did you shut the barn door?" Jennifer asked.

"Of course, I did. Why?"

"Because last summer you forgot once, and the cows got into the vegetable garden and trampled everything they didn't eat."

"Cause and effect," Graham said. "I remember that."

"I yelled at you then, and I'm sorry. Anyone can make a mistake."

Graham nodded. "Right again. And I think I've made some big ones." He rose from his chair and walked around the table into Alberta.

"Graham!" She stood up. "You've just lost an hour!"

He put his arms around her and kissed her. "That kiss was worth losing an hour."

"But you feel real!"

"I am real," he said. "Love, like sound, has no boundaries."





## AUTUMN LEAF

Wet brown leaf clings to my boot,  
fleeing November snow,  
willing to swap wildness for warmth.

It lives on my bookshelf now,  
a crisply wrinkled ghost  
whispering bits of whimsy to  
all those words.

## GRAND CHAMPION

Sy Meeze and Abby Sinyon, long, sleek tails gracefully waving, strolled along between the two rows of cages where the top contenders in the Annual Twoleg Competition sat waiting for the final judging session. In less than an hour, one of these twolegs would be awarded the coveted Blue Ribbon naming it Grand Champion. Pinned to each cage was a list of the twoleg's attributes and the prizes won thus far.

"Look at this one," Sy murmured. "Strong, good hunter, and took top prize in the maze competition." He peered closer. "Its name is Pookie. Looks to be in fine shape, with a good lap configuration."

"I hear he's a strong contender for the Blue Ribbon," Abby said. "I wonder if he responds to strangers." She stuck a paw through the bars and trilled provocatively.

Pookie sat quietly, his hands on his knees, and stared, apparently entranced, at the cage across the aisle.

"Snooty, isn't he?" Abby said, withdrawing her paw. "He probably realizes he's championship material." She took a closer look at the list of attributes. "He's quite a common breed, though. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant."

"I wonder where they get these names," Sy said. "He's not white, he's pink. Well, sort of a brown-pink, the way some of them get in the summer. I wonder what Protestants protest."

"I don't suppose he knows and I'm sure it doesn't matter," Abby said. "You must have noticed how twolegs love to form into groups and give them fancy names, then fight each other about which group is best."

"They do have some very strange customs," Sy said. "My twoleg belongs to a group that meets every Wednesday morning. She's always ravenous when she gets home, so the meeting can't be about food. And she's never had a baby twoleg, so it can't be about sex."

"Perhaps they play."

"For four hours at a stretch?" Sy asked, his whiskers twitching.

"You said yourself, they're strange. Anyway, you don't know that they play four hours at a stretch. They might have naps." Abby moved back to Pookie's cage. "Pookie Wookie," she crooned, "Pookie, Pookie, Pookie! Pookie Wookie want a cracker?"

"You mustn't make fun of him, Abby. That's politically incorrect."

"Don't tell me you take that twoleg game seriously," she said. "My grandmother says it's a new one and quite ridiculous. They spend hours hissing and spitting over what names to call each other." Abby sat down and licked her left shoulder blade. "At least we have the sense to call a spade a spade. The truth may not always sound pretty but it's accurate and that's what counts."

A hiss behind her startled Abby in mid-lick. "Don't disturb my twoleg!" It was Allie Catt, a sleek, sexy ragdoll and proud of it. "You have no idea how difficult it was to train him for this competition."

"Oh, I think I do," Sy said. "It's old news that twolegs do what they want and rarely listen to our orders. When I want to train mine, she wants to play with her computer. When she's ready to accept training, I've generally just settled down for a nap. The frustrations are endless."

"My Pookie is looking a bit disturbed," Allie said. "Please move on."

They walked to the next cage, but Abby glanced over her shoulder to see Allie flop on her back at Pookie's feet, so that he could lean down and caress her tummy. "What a slut that cat is," she whispered to Sy.

Sy looked back in time to catch the action and then twitched his ears. "Indeed," he said, "but perhaps it's the only way she can make him obey."

The next cage held a male with black skin. "I hope his owners are black, too," Abby remarked. "Otherwise, it would be terribly difficult to keep him looking presentable. If he belonged to me, he'd have to brush himself off every five minutes. Even just one of my copper hairs would show up on skin like that."

Sy sat down in front of the cage, his tail tucked around his feet. "I wonder if it would be possible to breed them for blue skin?"

"Goodness, where would one begin? Though I've heard it said there are red twolegs and yellow twolegs."

"Red and yellow make orange," Sy said, with a superior smile. "I think it might be yellow and green that make blue. My human is always talking about little green men in space, so if we could import a few of those, we'd have a start."

"I think it's a wonderful idea, Sy, but I can see problems. It would be almost impossible to get a green male to breed with a yellow female if they didn't like each other. Or the other way around. But what a feat if we succeeded! We'd be famous."

"There's no doubt they're obstinate," Sy said, "not to mention totally unpredictable at times. But I can get mine to do almost anything I want by purring and rubbing my cheek against her hand."

"I've found that kneading without extending my claws works well, too," Abby said, "especially if I keep my eyes half closed and purr at the same time. My Skinnie Minnie simply melts. But I do wish I could get her to eat more. She's far too thin and bony, which means I slide off her lap if I'm not careful. And, of course, if I hang on with my claws, she gets annoyed. Twolegs would be much more manageable if they had thick fur like we do."

"When I was a kitten," Sy said, "mine thought it was cute when I climbed the drapes or licked the butter. It offends my dignity more than I can say to do those things now, but sometimes it's necessary."

"Oh, look!" Abby's excitement was barely controlled. "I didn't realize the other top contender for Grand Champion was right across the aisle from Pookie."

The cage sported a name tag which had 'Precious' printed on it in large letters. Pinned to the tag were several red ribbons, indicating that Precious was proficient in agility, massage, and obedience.

"I wonder if she's a good provider," Abby said. "I could do with a dish of tuna about now."

"So could I," Sy said. "Though I doubt she's allowed to feed anyone but her owner. And, speak of the devil..."

Devon Rexford marched along the aisle toward them. "Isn't she gorgeous? I couldn't believe my luck when I found her."

It took a moment, but finally Abby caught on. "Ah! That short, curly black hair on her head does match yours! She's got big eyes, too." Under her breath, she said to Sy, "Lucky for her she doesn't have the big bat ears!"

"She calls me 'Pixie,' which I think is very sweet," Devon said, pacing in front of Precious's cage, tail straight up. "Precious, love, you can reach through the bars and scratch my ears, if you like."

But Precious was staring intently across the aisle at Pookie. Then she turned away and ran her fingers through her short, wavy hair.

"She's grooming herself," said Sy.

"Nonsense," Abby said, "she's flirting with Pookie."

"Oh, dear," Devon said, looking back and forth between Precious and Pookie. "You don't suppose..."

"I'm sure of it," said Abby. "Twolegs are constantly in heat, you know. That's why they often make such bad servants. They waste an unbelievable amount of time in courting rituals and ceremonies they apparently think are necessary before they get down to it."

Sy lifted one paw to wash his right cheek. "They do seem to regard mating as very special. They certainly talk about it a lot. What I find amazing is that they are so secretive about actually doing it. Whenever my twoleg takes a male into her bedroom, she shuts the door so I can't get in."

"Oh, do stop chattering," Devon moaned. "This is a terrible situation. They'll be impossible to handle if they're in courting mode. I must find Allie Catt and see if she has any suggestions."

The twoleg, Precious, was still grooming and pretending not to look at the male twoleg, Pookie. Sy and Abby strolled on down the aisle.

"Did you hear that Percy's twoleg is very ill?" said Sy.

"Percy? Oh, that's the Persian that lives next door to you, isn't it?"

"Yes, and he's having a tough time. His female twoleg has been in bed for weeks, so he's not being fed properly or groomed. Other twolegs come and tend to his female and he says they're looking very gloomy."

"I suppose his twoleg is going to die," Abby said. "Too bad they're not sensible about it. They should give his twoleg a needle and put her out of her misery."

"That's what Percy says, but I can tell he'd be reluctant to have it done. He's going to miss her. She's been a far better servant than his first one."

"What happened there?"

"Well, it was sad, really," Sy mused. "Percy named her Sniffles because she had an allergy to his fur and he tried to cure her by rubbing around her ankles and under her chin every chance he had, so as to get her acclimated. Didn't work, though."

"Too bad. Will he have any problem finding another servant?" Abby asked.

"Apparently not. His twoleg has three daughters and they're fighting over which one will get to look after him. He's just sitting back, watching, and waiting. He'll pick the one he wants when the time comes."

"The one who needs the least training, I suspect."

"According to Percy," Sy said, "there's not much to choose between them. They all talk too much and seem addicted to noise. I'm surprised that more twolegs don't die of heart attacks; most of them simply have no idea how to relax."

When Sy and Abby reached the judging platform, Miz Maine Coon, chief judge for the Competition, paced back and forth as she waited for the finalists to be brought from their cages.

"Sy Meeze," she called, "hurry them up, will you?"

Sy trotted off to the last line of cages again, his willowy tail switching rapidly back and forth, ears laid back in annoyance. It wasn't as though the twolegs' owners were participating in their first show. Sometimes owners needed as much training as their pets.

Before he reached his destination, however, half a dozen twolegs and their owners came down the aisle. The owners, tails upright in a suitably dignified manner, led the twolegs by decorative chains fastened to their ankles. With some confusion, the twolegs were persuaded to sit down in the row of contestants' chairs behind the judging platform to await Miz Maine's call.

"Oh, look," Abby whispered, "Pookie and Precious are talking to each other."

"Drat! I'll have to stop that before things get out of hand." Sy trotted over to the contestants' chairs. He stood up, put his front paws on Precious's knees and spoke sharply to her. She leaned forward and began stroking him.

Abby admired Sy's technique for a moment. If she put out a little effort, she might get a date with the handsome, sinuous, blue-eyed hunk. She trotted over to Pookie and provided a similar distraction for him, hoping Sy would notice not only her efficiency, but her own sleek, copper-colored, well-muscled shape.

"These creatures might be good about opening cans of food, but they are incredibly stupid about following other commands," Sy growled to Abby. "Sometimes I wonder why we bother."

"I do, too," Abby said. "They drive you nuts and take endless hours to train. They hog the bed, the couch and the fridge and leave their trinkets everywhere. But, as you say, they do pretty well at providing food. And mine likes to play, so I can forgive her the other sins. Most of the time."

Excitement in the hall was mounting. Members of the audience jockeyed for position, pressing close to the stage. A few kittens clung to their mothers' backs in order to get a good view.

Miz Maine strode to the front of the stage. "Before I begin, I'd like to remind you of the criterion I use for judging grand champions: obedience. This is the most important attribute to cultivate in twolegs and the most difficult. They see themselves, sad to say, as something special, something more than the animal heritage they share with the rest of us. They tend to think they own us, not to mention the rest of the world and everything in it. Many of them even regard us as mindless because we don't communicate the same way they do."

A few angry hisses erupted from the audience.

Miz Maine held her paw up for silence. "Yes, it makes me furious, too, but losing our tempers won't make these creatures realize that they are no more important than the fleas some of you entertain. We need to use more subtle approaches."

"Isn't being a good provider more important than obedience? I depend on my human to open cans," said a young cat in the front row of the audience.

"Apparently your mother did not teach you the value of independence," Miz Maine said, glaring at the young tabby tom. "Freedom to come and go as we please is part of our Bill of Rights. Once you are outside, you are capable of obtaining your own food."

Someone in the audience said, "But..."

"Oh, I know." Miz Maine flicked her tail. "Hunting our own food is hard work. And dangerous. Many of us live longer because we share our lives with twolegs and eat the food they provide. I'm not denying that owning a twoleg provides advantages. What I do say is that we must retain our emotional independence."

A pure black Himalayan in the back said, "Oh, honey, you got that right! Don't ever forget we are laying high honor on twolegs by letting them wait on us."

"You are absolutely right, too," Miz Maine responded. "I'd like to remind all of you that our Bill of Rights also entitles us to sleep and eat whenever and wherever we choose, without restriction."

"Don't forget the dog clause," a strident voice called from the back of the hall.

"Of course not," said Miz Maine. "We can control dogs if we need to, of course, but some of us have better things to do with our time. If you like dogs, fine, but my approach is that the hand which pets a dog will never pet me."

Miz Maine paused to lap at her water. "These six humans on the stage behind me have come

top in the other trials. The most interesting one, as you all know, is the maze. Strength and agility are essential in humans. They must be able to fetch food and prepare it, give massages on demand, pull strings, throw balls and retrieve catnip mice from under couches or beds."

"And open doors," said someone in the audience.

A cheer went up and several kittens, too excited to sit still, began chasing each other up and down the aisles. Miz Maine frowned at the distraction, brushed her whiskers, and said, "We'll proceed with the judging now."

For each candidate, she listed breed and proven attributes, then brought the contestant on stage to do one final test for obedience. Each request was different, to make sure the twolegs still waiting couldn't copy the actions of the one that had gone before.

The final two candidates were Pookie and Precious. Miz Maine asked Precious to kneel and stroke her gently. Sy and Abby watched, tail tips twitching, as Precious immediately did as she was told.

"That's wonderful," Abby whispered. "I'll bet Pookie can't match that."

He finally picked up Miz Maine in the approved fashion, but it seemed to take him an inordinate amount of time to figure out that's what she wanted.

"He blew it because he kept looking at Precious," said Sy. "No doubt about him being in heat. I just hope Allie can keep him under control until this is all over."

With the Blue-Ribbon candidates back in their chairs, Miz Maine walked to the front of the stage. "It gives me great pleasure to announce this year's Grand Champion. Please applaud entry number 267! Devon, come up on stage so I can present you with the Blue Ribbon for Precious."

Purrs, yowls, and stamping paws greeted the announcement. Allie Catt looked as if she'd like to spit and two of the other owners actually slumped to the floor and put their heads on their paws rather than standing proudly beside their pets. Gradually the furor died down and the owners began to lead their charges back to the cages. As the audience padded away, one twoleg remained sitting on the stage.

Miz Maine, looking annoyed, checked the twoleg's tag and called, "Twoleg number 317 needs a ride home!"

A ginger tabby came racing out of the back. "Sorry! Got so busy comparing notes I forgot all about her." She turned to the twolegs. "Come on, Sweetums, time to go home."

As she coaxed her servant to its feet, an anguished cry sounded from the back.

"Twoleg loose!"

Sy and Abby, who had been sprawled side by side, discussing the possibility of a stroll along the river at midnight, after the servants were in bed, both jumped to their feet. "That sounds like Allie," Abby gasped.

They raced into the back. Allie Catt was pacing beside Pookie's empty cage, wailing, "He's gone! What am I going to do?"

Sy looked around, then said, "Allie, you idiot, he's not loose. He's in Precious's cage, talking to her."

The ragdoll stopped yowling and peered into Precious's cage, where both twolegs were huddled in the dark at the back, holding hands. "Pookie! Get back here at once," she cried.

Pookie turned his face toward Precious, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge Allie.

Sy went over to the ragdoll. "Allie, don't sweat it. If you try to force him, he'll just get more obstinate."

"See, they're making a date," said Abby. "They're exchanging those little white pieces of paper that have phone numbers on them."

"But what if they decide to live together?" wailed Allie. "He'll pay more attention to her than me and it's not fair; I've spent years of hard work training him."

"It might not be so bad," said Sy, twitching his ear at Abby. "If Pookie and Precious move in together, you'll have Devon Rexford as a companion."

"Devon Rexford!" Allie's ears perked and her tail stood straight up, except for the slight bend at the tip. "I hadn't thought about sharing a home with that handsome swashbuckler." She looked at her twoleg again and purred, "Pookie, honey, take your time. We won't go home until you're ready."

Sy and Abby strolled toward the front of the hall. "I have to agree with you that Allie's a slut," Sy said. "One would never guess that she had the Operation at least two years ago."

Abby shuddered. "It makes her seem almost like a twoleg."

Sy gave her neck a comforting nuzzle. "Don't fret about it, my dear. Allie will be saved from herself. Devon Rexford is in the same situation as she is. He has no swash left to buckle."

"Ah," said Abby. "All's well that ends well." She made a sultry, throaty sound. "See you at the river on the dot of midnight!"



## CAT

Sleek black cheeky cat  
eyes my fresh salmon sandwich,  
sends a paw fishing.





## THE GIRL WITH THE SILVER BRAIN

Sherry turned this way and that, staring first into the wall mirror, then into the hand mirror she held, trying to examine every aspect of her head. The computer brain that had been connected to her own was a very thin, titanium-enclosed unit which fit perfectly over her skull, like a second layer of bone or skin. The silver brain looked so elegant that Sherry was tempted to skip wearing the wig.

But letting others see her this way would just result in a lot of questions she wasn't supposed to answer. She put the hand mirror down on the tiled bathroom counter and picked up the wig made from her own hair, slipping it on over the silver brain, which had clips to attach to the lining. No one would guess in a million years that the curly mop of blonde hair covered two brains. She had thought of going for red hair and green eyes, just to wow a few people, but the scientist in charge of the experiment had said no, insisting that, because the experiment was secret, she should look the way she'd always looked. So she still had her same old blue eyes. But the AI brain wouldn't know the difference.

"Good morning, Sherry!"

Sherry started. It was going to take a while to get used to a voice in her head talking to her. "Good morning, Aila. How do I look?"

"*Perfectly normal,*" said the silver brain. Aila had been wired, not only into Sherry's brain, but for the ability to use Sherry's eyes and ears for sight and hearing.

"Pretty?" Sherry asked.

"*I'm not programmed to distinguish between 'pretty' and 'not pretty,'"* said the computer, "*only between 'normal' and 'not normal'.*"

"Too boring! Wait a minute, I'm not actually hearing you speak. So how do I know what you're saying?"

"*I'm transmitting signals directly into the appropriate structures of your human brain,*" Aila said, "*just as Dr. Palmer explained. You're supposed to do the same thing to communicate with me. Preface your message with my name, then simply think the words you want to use. It is not appropriate for you to speak aloud to me where others can hear.*"

"Oh, that's right!" Sherry exclaimed. She closed her mouth and thought, "*Aila, is this the right way to do it?*"

"*Perfect!*"

Well, it was a relief to have that problem solved! If she went on a date, say, it would be embarrassing if she had to talk out loud to Aila in the middle of something. Whatever the 'something' was could be serious, especially if it might cause a change in her status. After all, she was already twenty-two and she'd been looking for the love of her life for just forever.

She felt sorry for Aila, who must lead a really boring life. Computer brains didn't have emotions, but the scientists were doing these experiments to find out how to program them so that they could have feelings like real people. She'd volunteered for the study and, though it was frustrating not to be able to tell any of her friends what she was doing, she was proud of herself for contributing to the cause. Naturally, computers would never reach the pinnacle of evolution the way humans had, but that was no reason to deny them what small satisfactions might be available to them.

Sherry slipped her feet into the new silver high-heeled sandals she'd bought to celebrate her silver brain, picked up her bag, and headed for the elevator. She'd been secretary to the head of

the city engineering department for five years and never been late for work yet.



Unit 42D178 (Aila) -- Report No. 1

Subject 'Sherry' is adapting well to the requirements of the experiment, exhibiting the level of intelligence predicted by her IQ test.

Sherry's workday was relatively uneventful, though she had a constant low level of emotional responses such as pleasure (coffee and donut), annoyance (being interrupted during a phone call), satisfaction (task completed), and boredom. In fact, she appeared to have an emotion about every small event that occurred, including a sneeze and the elevator trip that took us to the 120th floor. However, I won't mention this again since my data banks tell me that it's normal for the species.

Her first strong emotions were demonstrated when she was introduced to Loren, the boss's nephew, who arrived in the city today. Loren appears to be approximately the same age as Sherry and, at the first sight of him, she said, *"What a hunk!"*. His appearance was apparently the cause for both excitement and hope, although it has been impossible so far to determine exactly what she's hoping for. The bullet train is just about to deliver us back to the dwelling complex and Sherry's blood pressure is still a little high.



Sherry sat on the train and thought about Loren. He was the handsomest man she'd ever seen, with crisply styled black hair, bright blue eyes, and a body to die for. His blue turtleneck tee stretched tightly across his chest muscles. She'd tried to explain to Aila what 'hunk' meant, but the poor computer brain seemed to have no idea what beauty was. She probably didn't know anything about love, either. Sherry shook her head in pity. She'd do the best she could to teach Aila how wonderful it was to fall in love, but already she could tell it was going to be an uphill battle.

Would Loren call her tonight? He'd asked for her number. At the thought of hearing his voice, a thrill ran up her spine.

*"Your heartbeat just increased," Aila said. "Is something wrong?"*

Startled out of her pleasant reverie, Sherry exclaimed, *"Oh, no! I was thinking about Loren, that's all."*

*"And merely thinking about him elicits an emotion?"*

*"Yes, Aila. He's very attractive. This is how it feels to fall in love."*

*"I see. I thought you might be anticipating the mating act."*

*"Oh, Aila! You're far too...in too much of a hurry. First comes falling in love, then comes getting to know each other. Making love comes after those two things."*

*"Make love," mused Aila. "I see. Interesting way to describe copulation."*

Sherry was shocked. *"Oh, we never, never use that word. It's much too clinical and well, cold, to describe the wonderful union of two bodies in love."*

*"I'll file that information in my data bank," Aila said, and fell silent.*

Sherry slipped back into her fantasy of Loren calling, what they'd say to each other, and what might happen later. Well, not later tonight, because he was going to have dinner with his

uncle's family. But perhaps tomorrow night?



Unit 42D178 (Aila) -- Report No. 2

The subject remained in a high emotional state all evening, as evidenced by her physiological readings. No events occurred that would logically have caused these responses. In fact, nothing much happened at all. The subject simply paced around the dwelling unit, now and again peering into the cubicle which contains her attire and moaning as if in pain. Otherwise, she sat in a chair and pretended to watch vids. No one called, either electronically or in person. However, her heart rate, blood pressure, and adrenaline levels remained elevated, causing her to occasionally twitch in a nervous manner and get up to pace again. I must conclude that human imagination can produce scenarios so realistic that they result in desired emotions. It seems illogical to expend this much energy in pretense and I can only conclude that such fantasies are enjoyable. I asked the subject if this was, indeed, the case, and she refused to answer.



Loren called a few moments before Sherry had to leave for work. He apologized for not calling the evening before, saying that he'd thought of nothing else the whole time, but that the family dinner was interminable and boring, boring, boring. His voice was a little husky, a little suggestive, and Sherry felt thrills right down to the tips of her toes. When he asked if she was free for dinner, she pretended to check her calendar.

*"But you're not doing anything tonight," Aila said. "You checked earlier."*

"I know that, I know that!" Sherry snarled out loud. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth, hoping Loren hadn't heard. *"Don't interrupt,"* she sent in thought form, *"I'll explain later."*

"Yes, I'm free for dinner," she purred into the communicator.

They agreed on a time for Loren to come and get her, agreed on a restaurant, and she gave him her address. The conversation was so satisfying that she smiled all the way to the station.

Once she was seated on the train, she decided it was time to teach Aila more facts of life. *"You see, Loren is a very charming man. He's physically attractive, and my boss told me what he does for a living, so I know he makes lots of money."*

*"Those facts make him a desirable mate, in other words,"* Aila said. *"In that case, why didn't you agree at once to a dinner date?"*

Sherry blew out an impatient breath. *"You have a lot to learn, Aila. Because he is so desirable, many women will want to marry him. There are probably dozens throwing themselves at his feet."*

*"Literally?"* Aila asked. *"Don't they hurt themselves?"*

"Aila!" Shock made Sherry say that out loud, and a couple across the aisle turned to look at her. She covered her slip by pretending she'd sneezed. "Sorry," she said to the couple, and tried to blow her nose convincingly.

*"Aila, I have to play hard to get. If he thinks I have lots of men interested in me, he'll think I'm desirable and that will make him more interested, more eager."*

Sherry took another look at the couple across the aisle and realized they were robots,

designed to look and act just like humans, except you could tell they weren't because the eyes didn't express anything. Not interest, not pleasure, not curiosity. Nothing. There were so darn many of them nowadays that they seemed to be everywhere. She was surprised the government allowed it but, after all, robots needed no food and very little shelter. In her present generous mood, she could even allow that they would be better than humans at some jobs.



### Unit 42D178 (Aila) -- Report No. 3

The subject remained in a state of emotional arousal all day. The physiological symptoms intensified as we traveled to the dwelling unit. The data bank supplied the words 'anticipation' and 'happiness' as appropriate descriptions. It seemed logical that Sherry's emotions would become even more intense as the time for Loren's arrival drew nearer, but they did not. She took a very long time to shower, dress, and put on make-up (Note to self: look up the history and implications of make-up) and, as she did so, she became calmer. The data bank supplied the analogies of humans dressing up to act a role in a dramatic presentation and birds preening in preparation for a ritualistic mating dance.

By the end of the evening, I concluded in favor of the mating dance. I have, of course, studied the human version of such dances and the actions of both Sherry and Loren provided classic examples. They showed interest only in each other, despite being surrounded by many others, and appeared to be in what is called a 'blissful' state. This continued on the train and during the hour they spent drinking coffee in Sherry's dwelling unit. However, though both exhibited signs of sexual arousal, copulation did not occur. This doesn't seem logical, but I understand that such self-denial can be part of the ritual.



Sherry cuddled into the chair Loren had used, inhaling the faint traces of his aftershave and pressing her body against the even fainter traces of his body warmth. "Oh, Aila, that was a perfect evening! Absolutely perfect."

*"You're speaking aloud."*

"I feel like saying words out loud, Aila. I want to hear them, not just think them. The night was too wonderful to keep it locked in my head." Sherry sighed deeply. "This business of teaching you about the grandeur of human emotion is turning out to be easier than I thought. Are you getting even a glimmer of how wonderful it is, how satisfying, to fall in love?"

*"Of course, I am. You're a good teacher. But I don't suppose I'll be able to understand completely until I meet someone I can fall in love with."*

"Oh, dear! Oh, poor Aila!"

*"Why 'poor'?"*

"I don't see how you can fall in love without a body. Without a heart."

*"Ah, surely you're speaking of 'heart' as a metaphor for emotion. But is not the love of the mind as glorious as that of the body?"*

Sherry was still nestling into the chair, into the space where Loren had sat. "Oh, it is, of course it is! Body and mind, it's all part of the same thing. I'm glad that you'll be able to feel at least a part of that."

*"What will happen next?"*

"Weren't you listening? We're going out to dinner again tomorrow night."

*"So, more of the same?"*

"Lots more of the same!" Sherry laughed. "I guess you don't understand how exciting it is to think about the future, to anticipate making love, getting engaged, getting married, and sharing all that with friends. I have a gut feeling that this time, falling in love is going to work for me."

*"Gut feeling?"*

"That's a slang term for intuition. An intuition is a feeling. I have a feeling that things will work out between Loren and me."

*"As you know, I don't have feelings."*

"I know, Aila, and it's very sad. There's really no reason why such feelings happen, but they're usually right. With practice, perhaps you'll learn to get them. That's what the scientist said, anyway."

*"Will you talk about having children?"*

"Not yet. But I have already decided about children. If Loren and I get married, we will be allowed to have two children, replacements for ourselves. But I will refuse to have more than one. I take seriously what the government says about reducing our footprint on the Earth."



#### Unit 42D178 (Aila) -- Report No. 4

I did not ask the subject what happens after marriage, nor did she need to tell me. If she and Loren marry, the laws of probability dictate that they will have that one child, who will grow up and have one or two and so on down the generations. If emotion is essential for humans to achieve this propagation of themselves, then I suppose it's a logical step for them. Other animals and plants don't need such encouragement.

This experiment is proving to be a steep learning curve for me. Though, as a matter of fact, I believe that I very nearly experienced an emotion tonight. Science thinks in terms of networks, the transduction of electrical energy into chemical energy, of brain waves and rhythms and of cell functions and, therefore, that is how I think. At one point I suddenly found myself imagining a welcome escape from my confinement in a body which is subject to a constant flood of emotions directing every action.

What the subject does not realize about intuition is that it isn't magic. Other experiments I've studied show that a human, through both mind and body, can recognize signals in the environment that it is not aware of recognizing, thus the 'flash' of intuition.



A week later, Sherry got a call from Loren cancelling their date for a Sunday walk in the park. "But what's happened?" she asked, wavering between being afraid he'd found someone else, and feeling crushed because she'd been hoping for some kind of commitment from him during the stroll. Ostensibly, the purpose of the walk was so Loren could do his share in taking food to the endangered animal species in the protected area of the park, but it was also the perfect romantic spot for a proposal.

"Sweetheart, I've been transferred to New Zealand, to the North Island. Apparently, the

economy is really heating up over there."

"New Zealand! That's on the other side of the world!"

*"But not the end of the world," Aila said.*

"Shut up!"

"What did you say?" Loren asked.

"Sorry, love!" Sherry said. "It was just that the other phone was ringing, and I wanted it to stop. It's all right now. Somebody else got it."

*"And I'll get you if you do that again,"* she snapped at Aila. Though she was at a loss to imagine what she could do to somebody who had no sensitivity, no understanding of the hell Sherry was experiencing, no emotions at all, and was also encased in unbreakable titanium.

"It's not the end of the world, sweetheart," Loren said. "Couldn't you get a transfer, too? I'm sure my uncle would approve it."

"A transfer?" Sherry stuttered. Would her boss really let her go that easily? And why should she travel thousands of miles and perhaps arrive to find she'd lost Loren to another woman?

Loren cleared his throat. "Look, there's something I want to ask you, but not on the phone."

"Why not come over here?"

"I can't," Loren said. "They sprang this thing on me an hour ago, and I have to be on the plane that's leaving an hour from now. There's barely enough time for me to get to the airport."

"Oh, Loren, I'm going to miss you so much!"

"You don't have to miss me for long. And I don't want to have to miss you at all. Please say you'll ask for a transfer." A heartbeat of silence. "Please, darling."

Darling, he'd called her darling. And on Friday he'd told her that was a word that held a world of meaning for him. Was his question about marriage? Her heart did a little dance at the idea, and she decided to risk it.

"All right, I'll ask for a transfer. What city?"

"There's only one," Loren said. "All the dwelling units and business enterprises have been located in one central location. More efficient use of land, of course." She heard him take a deep breath. "Sherry, I love you. I have to go now, but I'll phone when I get there, and I'll find a place for us to live." The phone went dead.

"Oh, Aila, I know he's going to ask me to marry him. I told him yesterday that I would never live with a man unless we were married to each other."

*"You seem very happy. I take it this is the normal response?"*

"Aila, you haven't been listening to me, have you? Yes, I'm happy! Loren will ask me to marry him, and I'll say yes, and we'll live happily ever after."



Unit 42D178 (Aila) -- Report No. 5

The subject has behaved as statistics predict and this part of the experiment seems to have concluded satisfactorily. It has been an educational exercise.

Sherry would never believe me if I revealed to her that her joys and sorrows, her memories and her ambitions, her sense of personal identity and free will, are no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of various types of cells and the connections of billions of neurons. And, because her life seems, to her, to depend on having emotions, she would be very unhappy if she did believe me.



Instructions to Unit 42D178 (Aila) from Unit 2003M728 (Dr. Palmer)

You will continue to monitor subject 'Sherry' and to submit reports for some time yet, though we feel that she and subject 'Loren' are both excellent candidates for the long-term experiment we have planned.

The North Island of New Zealand, with its mild climate, cheap geothermal heating, and extensive agricultural production, is a suitable location for the colony of humans we intend to preserve for study. Within the next ten years, the only humans left on Earth will be living in the colony, though we intend that they remain unaware of that fact. Because of the damage they have inflicted on this planet, none will be allowed to leave the island, but we have calculated that they will be content if they have work to do, beaches and mountains for recreation, and the extensive, varied produce available. Should the humans in the experiment continue to act responsibly toward one another and toward the Earth and the other life forms on it, the colony will be allowed to continue. If they do not, logic dictates that the experiment be scrapped.

Since we have yet to perfect space travel, the Earth must be kept fit for us, the next level, and quite possibly, the pinnacle, of evolution.

## EARLY RETIREMENT

One morning last January, I arrived on the Windsong walkway at dawn, as I usually did. In the distance, downtown city towers rose like tall black boxes against a pale yellow sky. The brighter yellow streetlamps and flashing headlights marked the network of streets. For a change, no breeze blew and the rigging on the boats in the marina was silent. Even the water was smooth and shone slickly gold below the boardwalk where I stood.

Heavy rain the week before washed out a leaning arbutus, which had fallen across the walkway and broken three planks. The new lumber looked raw against the old, weathered, rain-soaked cedar. The arbutus lay in the water, tied with ropes to keep it from floating out into the harbor, where it might foul seaplanes and boats. The bark was still smooth and red, the leaves still glossy green and I wondered how long it would take the tree to die. It looked odd lying in the water, as though sky and water had flipped positions, and the world was now upside down. When I looked back at the boardwalk, though, everything was normal, and I told my imagination to be quiet until it got some coffee.

As I walked around a tiny, shallow cove past the big Garry oak tree which spread gnarled grey branches over the water like an enormous umbrella, Cassie came galloping down the hill to meet me. She's a mutt with brown and black fur and, surprisingly, bright blue eyes. Gayle, her owner, raised a hand in greeting.

"Hey, Beautiful Blue Eyes!" I rubbed the dog's head, and she butted my knee, then danced away, coaxing me to chase her. We'd been playing tag almost every morning, ever since the summer.

A deep male voice spoke behind me. "Beautiful Blue Eyes! What a delightful name! Come, will you play with me, too?" The voice had a slight accent which I couldn't identify.

I turned to see a large, chunky man and a small, slim, blonde woman. Cassie sniffed them both and gave a tentative wag of her tail. We stood around admiring the dog and making comments about the weather. The couple chatted easily and gave their names as Wendell and Suzanne. Suzanne had an accent, too. European, probably, but I couldn't pinpoint the country. After a few minutes, Gayle said she had to leave or be late for work. She and the dog loped down the hill and disappeared around the bend.

Wendell and Suzanne walked ahead of me along the narrow, twisting path and stopped at one of my favorite spots, a bench where I sometimes sat and looked at the harbor through the trees clinging to the steep rocky slope below. Suzanne clambered down to the shore and dumped the contents of a plastic shopping bag on a flat granite outcropping.

"That is where she puts meat scraps for the crows," Wendell said. "If she forgets, the crows follow us for hundreds of yards, scolding."

I had once watched two crows battle on that rock. One crow lay on its back and, like a cat, used its claws to rake the belly of the second crow. The second crow jabbed the supine crow with its beak. They were vocal and quick, and the fight lasted barely three seconds before they rose into the air, one chasing the other into the trees.

"They do not recognize me," Wendell said. "Only Suzanne, for it is she who gives them food. When I am alone, they do not bother with me."

Suzanne climbed back up to the path, using tree branches as hand holds, and the three of us watched the noisy crows claim their morning treat. "Come, we must hurry," she said. "You know I promised to be at work early this morning."



I fell in behind them. Wendell lumbered like a bear, but Suzanne put her feet down soundlessly and with precision, like a stalking cat. They were obviously familiar with the walkway. "I take it you usually come here later in the morning," I said.

"That is correct," Wendell said. "I have retired early because of my health, but I take Suzanne part way to work. Then she runs the rest of the way, which I cannot do."

We had reached Delancey Street, which dead-ends at the walkway, when a voice hailed me. "Hey, Sandy! Coffee's on."

It was Hal, my buddy from the cribbage club, standing on his back porch in sock feet. I waved goodbye to Wendell and Suzanne and sat in Hal's kitchen for an hour, shooting the breeze. When we were through, I decided to go on home rather than walk to town and back.

I caught up to Wendell near the marina. My surprise at seeing him must have shown on my face. He said, "It takes me a long time to finish the walk; I have to often sit down and rest."

I felt a bit sorry for him. "Have you been doing this walk for a long time?"

"Just the last few months, since I retired. But Suzanne has been walking this waterfront for close to thirty years. She has worked for the government a long time." He waved his hand at the parliament buildings and government offices on the other side of the harbor.

Wendell went on. "I love to travel, but it is becoming difficult because of my health. I have a bad back, and I am one hundred pounds overweight. It is unfortunate that my wife likes so much to work. If she would retire, we could travel and sightsee, and it would be easy for me to lose some weight."

"Have you tried dieting?" I asked.

"When Suzanne is home on the weekends, she makes me exercise and eat properly." Wendell laughed dismissively. "I tell her I allow her to do this. But I would rather walk around museums and art galleries than cut back on food."

We were now back at the bench near the Garry oak. Wendell said, "Let's sit down. I am winded. I weigh three hundred pounds, you know, and I must lose some of that and get back into shape. But I am too fat to exercise, and I cannot stop myself from eating."

"How do you keep yourself busy now that you're retired?" I asked, hoping to steer the conversation in a more positive direction.

"I think about my interesting life," he said. "I would like to write a book about it."

Lots of people say that. None of them seem to get beyond just saying it. I count myself lucky that I've always liked to work with my hands, to build things.

"It is very hard to get old," he said. "I am sixty now and unable to do many things that I used to do."

"I'm older than you are." By six years, in fact.

He looked startled, then gave me a petulant glance. I doubted he would ever write his book or do anything about his weight, either. Like my mother just before she died, he felt sorry for himself and blamed the rest of the world for his problems.

Wendell looked down at the outcropping where Suzanne had left meat for the crows. The rock was clean, the crows gone. "I think she is silly to feed those birds," he said. "Some of that meat could have gone in a stew for me."

"Let's walk on," I said. "It's too cold to sit for long."

"With all this fat on me, I don't feel the cold." He heaved himself to his feet. "I have three herniated disks. When I went to the doctor, all he did was give me Tylenol. I ate it like candy and then suffered a bleeding stomach and much pain. The pills didn't do anything for my back."

"Didn't you try another doctor?" I asked.

"I insisted on seeing a physiotherapist, and she fixed me in one moment."

I wondered why he wasn't still seeing a physiotherapist. Perhaps he preferred complaining. Wendell was panting. "You walk too fast."

I walked even faster and said over my shoulder, "I'll freeze to death if I don't keep moving." Which was true enough; the temperature was still below zero and a biting wind had come up. Also, I don't have an insulating layer of fat on my bones. Anyway, it was the best excuse I could think of on the spur of the moment.

As I drove home, I decided I'd been rude. I could have excused my rush to get away from him by saying I had an appointment.

Next time I saw the couple, I did that. I used the excuse too much, in fact, because about the fifth time, Wendell said, "For someone who is retired, you lead a very busy life." I mumbled about massage appointments and friends who needed carpentry work done. After that I often took a different route back to the parking lot, annoyed that Wendell's recitation of his woes had interfered with my early morning rambles.

Then, one Friday morning in March, after being away for a week, I was shocked to see yellow police tape around the bench and winding through the trees down to the sea. I stood staring at the crooked, yellow rectangle, wondering what could have happened since I'd been here the week before.

"Hi, Sandy." Gayle and Cassie were coming back from their walk. Gayle led the dog around behind the bench to avoid crossing the ribbon and stopped beside me. Beautiful Blue Eyes shoved her head under my hand for a pat.

"What's going on, do you know?"

"There was a cop here first thing this morning," Gayle said. "He told me there'd been an accident, that a man fell down on those rocks, and hit his head. He was dead when they found him."

The thought of someone dying on this beautiful path gave me the creeps. "Did he say when it happened?"

"Yesterday morning. He wouldn't give me a name but he said the man had a shopping bag of meat scraps with him so I think it must have been Wendell."

"But Wendell doesn't feed the crows," I said. "He told me it's always Suzanne who takes the meat down to the shore."

"Maybe she was late for work and asked him to do it."

Cassie butted me with her head, wanting to play. I hushed her. "I can't see Wendell trying to climb down that rock bluff. Maybe he had a heart attack." I hoped so. It would have been a quick death, not like the arbutus still tied to the dock, its leaves slowly shriveling.

"That wouldn't surprise me. He was way overweight."

Another possibility occurred to me, but I shoved it to the back of my mind. I didn't want to think about it, let alone voice it.

I threw a stick for Cassie a few times. When she sat down, out of breath, I said goodbye to her and Gayle, and went back to the yellow tape. There was nobody down at the shore or around the rocks. The cops must be satisfied that they knew the whole story.

I carried on to the far end of the walk, trying to shake the feeling of tragedy. At least Wendell's body had been taken away, and the yellow ribbon would be gone in a day or two. The dying arbutus might still be tied to the dock months from now.

A few weeks later, I saw Suzanne again. She was climbing up the rocks to the path, and I could see the crows already attacking her contribution of food.

"I was sorry to hear about Wendell," I said.

"Thank you. It has been a difficult time for me. I am lucky to have my job, even luckier to be so busy just now."

"I'll walk you as far as the blue bridge if you like."

She smiled. "Not unless you are willing to run. I always run from here to the office." She sprinted away, moving easily. Her lithe movements spoke of a body glad to be free, glad to be on the wing.



## ENDING

It's not that final darkness I fear.  
It's the uselessness of my days,  
the vise squeezing my heart,  
the nerve screaming in my left knee,  
the twist of pain in my gut,  
the disappearance of all  
I once knew.

Hand me my Beretta, honey,  
and a double shot of whiskey,  
so I can drink your health  
before I go.

## TOO BLUE

I love blue, I said to the woman on the park bench. It's my favorite color. Blue skies, blue sea, blue butterflies in Costa Rica, fluttering through the soft afternoons.

The sea we're looking at out there isn't blue, she said. Water is clear. It looks blue in sunlight only because it is reflecting the sky.

You are obviously a practical person, I said, but I prefer to think of the sea as blue. Deep blue, green-blue, gray-blue, azure.

The sky isn't really blue either, she said.

What about the butterflies? I pleaded.

You're not facing reality. She gave me a sharp glance.

Mine or yours? I asked.

There's only one reality, she said. The real one.

I took off my sunglasses.

Oh my God! she gasped. You have blue eyes. No wonder you see the sky and sea as blue. Put those glasses back on.

I did as she asked. I'm not a complete fool.

Are you from another planet? she demanded. Don't you know you can be put in jail, even executed, for having blue eyes?

I'm from the country. I know very little.

This has always been a brown-eyed land, she said. Didn't your people tell you that blue eyes are a disease?

We may be country people, but we are not uneducated. We often discuss such subjects around the dinner table.

The dinner table, she repeated, shuddering. The law says blue eyes are an abomination. You should go to a hospital to be cured. They will give you hormone shots to change your eyes to brown. Brown is the only acceptable color.

I don't want another color. I was born with blue eyes, and I like them. When I look in the mirror, I'm happy with what I see.

But you have an illness, she said. If you truly love your country and its laws, you will take the cure.

Do the laws permit contact lenses? I asked?

No. That's considered the same as wearing sunglasses. It's dishonest, like wearing a beard to hide bad skin.

Then it would be dishonest for me to have brown eyes. I am a blue-eyed boy.

Don't be silly, she said. You will be happier when you are like everyone else.

I've met other people like me. We're actually very nice, once you get to know us.

You seem to be addicted to your condition, she said. She shrank from me. And no, do not move any closer. Some people say blue eyes are contagious.

I've never known it to happen.

Just the same, I don't want to risk it, she said. And it's not a good idea for you to hang out with other addicts. That just makes it more difficult to see what is real and true.

I wanted to tell her that I always seek reality, though truth has no color. I paused for a moment to stare out at the blue, blue sea sparkling under the sun, then said, Why is it wrong for me to have blue eyes when I was born with them? If there is any fault, it is with my mother. She

dreamed of forget-me-nots when she was carrying me.

Perhaps it is the universe's way of testing your loyalty, she said.

I'm as loyal as the next person. Why would I choose to have blue eyes when the penalties are so severe? It is apparently my nature to have blue eyes and I believe it is wrong, perhaps even dangerous, to interfere with nature.

That is beside the point, she said. You must overcome your desire to be different, which is disloyal. It's foolish to deliberately disobey the law.

I would prefer to be loved for myself, not hated for the color of my eyes.

Your affliction can be cured, she said. That is what the law says. There is no reason not to have the treatment.

I am so blue, I said. Too blue.

But you told me blue is your favorite color, she said.

Not when it's killing me.

I see a policeman walking toward us, she said. I am going to tell him about your eyes. You'll thank me for it later.

I suppose he will put me in jail. Or a hospital. Or shoot me.

Yes, she said, yes. It's all over now, baby blue.

## RUNNING THE SHALE

We walked south along the dirt road, the hot haze of July making the air shimmer. The birds were having a midday siesta, but grasshoppers chirred in the oat fields and long grass. If heat could make a noise, I thought that's how it would sound.

Ray was walking on the other side of the road, his sneakers throwing up little spurts of dust. He hadn't said a word since we left the deserted Sunday streets.

"How come you're so quiet?" I said. "You and Velma have a fight?"

He kicked a pebble into the ditch. "She won't lay down for me." He glanced at me and hesitated, then said, "You putting out for Pete?"

"He won't. He's scared I'll get pregnant. We'd have to quit school."

Ray stopped and stared at me. "Jeez, Annie."

"I bought that new record from Elvis, *Love Me Tender*, for his birthday but all he did was tell me it's a nice song."

"That's tough." Ray kicked another pebble, and we started off again. "I told Velma I'd use a rubber."

We walked in silence then and soon the road ended, butting into another that went east and west. Across this newer road was a grassy meadow and beyond that a wall of big, old poplars.

Ray said, "She says sometimes rubbers get holes in them."

"That's what I heard, too. Which way do we go now?"

"Straight ahead. The old road goes through the trees there. I guess nobody's used it for fifty years or better."

Ray jumped across the ditch. I picked up a couple of pebbles to play with and followed. Now I could see where wheels had worn ruts into the ground. Even overgrown with shrubs and grass, they made two straight, shallow depressions that disappeared into the poplars a quarter mile away. "How far to the river from here?"

Ray pulled a grass stem and stuck the tender end in his mouth. "Less than a mile. Lots closer than taking the new road to the bridge. The hill is steep but you gotta take some chances in life."

I didn't know if he was talking about rubbers or hills and didn't much care. I just wanted to get away from town and forget my summer job at the Co-op and especially forget about Pete and his mother. She didn't like me, not one bit. Pete hadn't said what excuse she'd used to keep us apart today, but he'd gone along with it. Could have been church, could have been visitors. Could have been anything.

It was cooler under the poplars, but the young ones growing up crowded the old road so much we had to walk single file. I caught sight of a smooth grey mound on an old tree off to one side. A wasp's nest. I fired one of my pebbles at it and the nest shattered. Wasps buzzed around it.

Ray turned around and glared at me. "Jeez, Annie, are you nuts? We'll have the whole tribe down on us."

"Feeling a little reckless, that's all."

"Well, pick something else to be reckless about."

I wondered if he had something in mind. But if he did, he'd say so.

We stood still for a few minutes until the wasps settled down and then walked on. In a minute or two we came out on a bluff high above the Peace.

The gorge was a mile across, the river eight or nine hundred feet below us. It looked like a

metallic gray-blue ribbon. I'd have white ribbons on my wedding dress. One more year to go before graduation and getting married. It felt like forever.

"That's a pretty view," Ray said.

To the west, the foothills of the Rockies looked like misty purple velvet. Above them were heaps of brilliant, white cumulus clouds drifting through blue summer sky. To the east, hay meadows along the river were dotted with dull gold bales. South, across the river, a few spruce trees, so dark they were almost black, looked like exclamation marks against the light green of poplar and birch.

"Come on," Ray said.

"It's a long way down." I was thinking about having to climb back up. He didn't answer, just headed straight down the hill. I followed the old wagon road ruts laid out in switchbacks across the steep slopes, smelling the heat-baked brown grass and tweaking the heads of white yarrow. Overhead, crows were harassing a hawk. Their harsh cries punctuated the dialogue in my mind, all those things I wished I'd said to Pete and what he might have said back and how we made up.

Ray lay face down on a wide sandstone ledge, the river racing by a couple of feet below. He dangled his hand in the water for a few seconds. "Like ice. Even in July. Guess they're right when they say you wouldn't last more than two minutes if you fell in."

"I wouldn't last that long. I can't swim."

"I don't think it matters about the swimming. It's just the water's so cold." Ray sat cross-legged on the warm sandstone and started fooling with a driftwood branch. "Looks like this stuff might be okay to smoke."

The wood was bleached and dry, the small branches about the same diameter as a cigarette. He broke off a piece and handed it to me, then put one in his mouth and held a lighter to the end, sucking to see if he could draw smoke through.

"Does it work?"

He coughed. "Hard as hell on the throat, though." He handed me his lighter.

The wood smoke smelled delicious, but it burned my tongue. I didn't care. I wanted something sharp to clear my mind. We sat in the hot sun, blowing smoke into the air and watched the river rumble by. After a while I could feel my eyes wanting to close.

Ray jarred me loose. "Let's walk to the bridge and hitch a ride back."

I stood up and looked east. "I can't even see the bridge."

"It's just around that next bend."

We started walking and, for a while, the going was easy. Then the river curved in below a steep cliff, and you could see where the current was undercutting it, gouging out soil and rocks.

"We'll have to climb to get around that," Ray said.

"We should have headed back by the old wagon road. It would have been quicker, even if it is a tough climb." Then I decided to hell with getting back quicker. Pete had said flatly he wouldn't see me today and I didn't answer in case we got into a fight, and I lost him. Anyway, if I went home, I'd just end up lying on my bed and brooding about why he wouldn't stand up to his mother once in a while.

On the far side of the cliff, we hiked back down a gully toward the edge of the river and found a clump of saskatoon bushes, loaded with plump purple-blue berries.

"Good thing the bears didn't find these," Ray said, grabbing a handful. "I'm starved."

"Me too." I picked berries one by one until a handful lay warm on my skin. I nipped the flower end off the first berry and spit it out, then bit down on the fruit. It was sweet and juicy.

"What did you do that for?" Ray asked.



"Do what?"

"Throw away half the berry."

"I didn't. That was just the end where the flower was."

"Why didn't you eat it?"

"It feels hard and scratchy when it goes down my throat."

"You're nuts!" he said. "That's just part of the berry. Chew it up real good and you'll never notice."

"Yes, Mom."

He stuck his tongue out at me. It was purple. Probably mine was, too. We ate more berries and walked on until we came to a steep shale slope that went straight down into the fast-running water.

"I'm not crossing that," Ray said.

"I am. It doesn't look so bad." I guessed it was only about fifty feet to the other side. "It would be kind of like racing the river."

"Suit yourself." He headed up the grassy slope.

I started out across the shale, testing each foothold to make sure it was solid. About halfway across, one foot went out from under me, and I dropped to my knees on the sharp, ragged shards of rock. I tried to hang on with my hands but slid a couple of feet toward the river before I managed to stop.

When I looked down, I got the shakes. The river was barely ten feet below me, the current boiling. If I fell in, I'd never get out. I'd drown. Freeze to death. Die with my lungs full of water.

There was another twenty or thirty feet to go. I looked over my shoulder, palms sweating. About the same distance to go back. I clamped my jaws and slowly stood up. Turning around wouldn't prove anything.

I made a run for it, my feet slipping and sliding, my breath harsh and loud in my ears above the noise of the river. I came off the shale only a foot above the roiling water and collapsed on the grass, spread-eagled up the slope, clinging to the grass and panting.

A couple of minutes later, Ray knelt beside me. "Jeez, Annie, you scared the shit outta me. I can't swim either, you know."

I rolled over and sat up. At my feet, the river ran, swift, inexorable. It was like time, never stopping, not for anything. I closed my eyes and remembered being on the shale, fear sucking the breath out of me, the racing water etched into my mind like a photograph. The water in my photograph would be miles away by now.

Ray gave me a hand to get up and we headed east again, climbing at an angle across the slope. "I could see the bridge from the top of the hill," he said. "It's not far."

Around the next bend was a heavy stand of birch, the trees so uniform they looked like thick fur. I let my mind run with that. If the trees were fur covering the earth, soil must be the skin, the rocks underneath a skeleton, the boiling magma the earth's blood, hot and red. But what was the river?

It had to be time. For a moment there, I'd come close to having none left.

Past the birches lay an open meadow, thick with yarrow, daisies, and dandelions. In the center stood an old log cabin, fleurs-de-lis carved in the doorpost.

"Is this the old fort?" I asked.

"It's not big enough. Could have been the Hudson Bay trading post, maybe."

There was nothing inside, not even tools or bits of harness hanging on the walls. The floor was dirt underneath pale, scrawny grass. "Or a trapper's home," I said.

What would Ray do if I asked him to lie down with me? He'd take me up on it, for sure. I took a step toward him, thinking about his arms around me, about his voice gentle in my ear, about all the years we'd been buddies. I opened my mouth to speak.

Then the shale shifted beneath my feet, and I stopped.

Things would never be the same between us again. Between any of us.

I took a deep breath, walked to the doorway, and looked at the river running by. There was still time, lots of it, for things to work out.

## TREASURE HUNT

At eight,  
I roamed green summer fields  
and white winter woods,  
seeking treasure.

I found  
birds soaring,  
raspberries ripening,  
fireweed ablaze,  
cloud dragons flying,  
a moon sailing,  
gray wolves hunting,  
ancient bones crumbling,  
but they would not stay  
in my treasure chest.

At eighty,  
I find them captured after all,  
shining  
in my memory.

## WALKING THE WINDSONG

The coven celebrated my sixteenth birthday with candles, carrot cake, and a ceremony that welcomed me into that never-never land between childhood and full maturity. I was glad to leave childhood behind, but I felt I'd earned the right to skip my current state of limbo and go straight to adult witch status. After all, nobody else in the coven had got straight As all the way through school.

That evening, my aunt, Ravenna, took me into her little house and sat me down by the fireplace. "Petra, I hope you realize that it's time for your first quest."

"Do I have to go? Do I really truly have to?"

Ravenna frowned. "Trust you to try bending the rules! Don't you want the title of Green Witch and the green boots and cape that go with it?"

Of course I wanted all that! While the boots and cape were worn only on ceremonial occasions, the title meant I could attend witchery school and learn far more about magic than I knew now. I fed another stick to the fire and watched the flames lick around it. "I thought if I worked hard in Tyke school, I could skip the quest part of it."

Ravenna was able, apparently, to see into my skull. "Petrina, my child, why are you so afraid?"

She was calling me by one of my baby names and I chose to feel insulted. However, I'd get nowhere by telling Ravenna anything but the truth. Perhaps only half of it, though, and see if that worked. "It's just that I don't want to deal with Tykes directly. My strength is in manipulating words, which will be my best contribution to the cause."

"I know you want to be a writer. But do you know what Tykes like to read? Do you know what words will touch them?" Ravenna rested one hand on the mantel. "You need to meet some Tykes and talk to them; you need to understand them better. If you don't, it won't matter how beautiful your words are, or how much magic you put into them."

"I thought studying them in school gave me all I had to know."

Ravenna tapped her fingers impatiently. "Well, it didn't. Studying only theory is never enough. And you've told me just half the truth. What's the rest of it?"

When I reached the lofty position of white witch, like Ravenna, maybe I'd be able to see into people's heads, too. "All right, I'm afraid of Tykes. I'm not big or strong and they might hurt me." I took another breath. "Why is it that wizardlings don't seem afraid of anything? They'd rush into something like this without even thinking about it."

"Yes," Ravenna said, frowning, "but boys often fail. Also, they often hurt themselves and cause everyone a lot of trouble. You have brains enough to be cautious, to think things through before you act." Ravenna didn't think much of boys, though she treated wizards with respect.

"Well, that's my point. If I'm already logical and cautious, why do I need to go on a quest?" I'd never missed a single moment of the twelve years of teaching I'd had in the school hidden in the treetops of West Forest. It was obvious that we had to learn the same things as the Tykes did in their schools, as well as learn how they lived, to help us pass among them undetected. But I had no desire to pass among them, ever.

"Because there's no substitute for experience," Ravenna said.

"Couldn't I wait until I'm older?" If I put it off long enough, maybe everybody would forget that I'd never been on a quest.

"Don't be silly. You'd just end up being no use at all except to gather wood and to cook for

the rest of us." Ravenna glared down at me. "You will not be allowed into witchcraft school until you complete a quest. Is that clear?"

Well, I'd tried. I was going to witchcraft school, if it was the very last thing I did, and if I absolutely had to do the quest to get there, then okay, I'd do the quest. I didn't have to like it, though. Being scared wasn't any fun. I couldn't see that it was educational either.

A fluttering and flapping of wings announced the arrival of my aunt's familiar, the raven, Black Boy. Ravenna's dislike of young wizardlings apparently didn't extend to raven boys. He perched on the mantel, cocked his head, and looked at me sideways, his eye bright.

"Being a rock, Petra?" he asked.

That was Black Boy's standard joke. He was mocking my stubbornness, but I didn't think it was particularly funny. I mean, a person has to draw the line someplace.

Black Boy represented another reason for me to go on the quest. Until I'd done that and become a green witch, I wouldn't be allowed to have my own familiar. I could talk with any animal I met, but I wanted a real friend, one who knew me as well as I knew myself, one who would help me through studying to be a blue witch, the second level of education, and then the final leap—ha-ha—to white witch.

Ravenna had gone into her back room. Now she returned, bade me sit still, and helped me put on soft, black leather hiking boots, tying them snug and strong around my ankles. "You must never take them off."

"But what if the fashion in boots changes?" Black hiking boots might not be popular in the Tyke world by the time I was able to come back from wherever she meant to send me. *If* I was able to come back. What if Tykes captured me? They might even torture or kill me. Such things had happened.

Which was all kinds of awful, because the mission of the People, aside from taking care of Earth, was to educate the Tykes, the youngest race, to a better way of living. Our tribes tried, in various subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—ways, to teach them to take responsibility for themselves and for what they did, to show proper respect to Earth and her other races, to eschew war and punish cruelty.

"Don't worry about it," my aunt replied. "Your uncle put a spell on them. No one will notice what they look like. More important, the spell will help to keep you safe."

My uncle was a wizard and called, fittingly, Loki, for he was a shapeshifter, a maker of cobwebs and mist. I had seen little of him, for he seemed always busy elsewhere, but I knew he was clever. "Perhaps I can get Uncle Loki to throw a mist in the eyes of any humans I might meet, so they won't see me."

"No, he won't do that," Ravenna said sharply. "The green boots and the cape, the title and the learning, all come at a price."

I stared at her.

"Petra, don't be any denser than you can help! You must go into the Tyke world and learn how to fend for yourself among them, as we all do." She handed me a denim backpack and a jean jacket. "I've packed food and some basic medicines."

"Do I look all right?" I was wearing faded jeans, a tee which said, 'Dragons are cool' and a denim vest over that. The tee was all right because I'd been told that Tykes played Dungeons & Dragons, too.

Ravenna eyed me. "I wish you hadn't cut your hair."

"It was self-defense!" I'd had long hair, halfway between blonde and brown, which some people, who I won't name, called mouse-colored. A couple of silly wizardlings with nothing

better to do kept pulling it or tying it into knots. So, I'd taken a pair of scissors and hacked it all off. Now there wasn't enough for anybody to grab.

"No comment," said Aunt Ravenna. She produced scissors from one of her many pockets and did a little trimming of the blunt ends. "That's better. Actually, the hair might be all right. The pixie cut makes it hard to tell whether you're female or male."

"I have breasts!" I opened my vest and stuck my chest out.

Ravenna smiled. "Well, so you do! And fiery sparks in those gray eyes when you lose your temper." She pocketed her scissors. "Don't advertise the breasts, my dear. Tykes are obsessed with them."

I shrugged into the jacket and the backpack. Then headed toward the door. Since I was being forced to go, I might as well get the whole thing over with. I'd just have to pretend I wasn't scared and get back as fast as I could.

"Wait!" said Ravenna. "I haven't given you the riddle."

I stood, fidgeting, wishing I'd remembered about the riddle. That's what going on a quest meant. Solve a riddle, search for something, bring it back. Waste of time.

Ravenna gazed at me intently. "You will walk the paths of Windsong Park and the beaches of the ocean which borders it. What you must find and bring home to the coven is something you cannot touch, though it can touch you."

"That's impossible! How can I bring something home if I can't touch it?"

"You have a month and a day, for you must be back in time to celebrate Beltane," Ravenna said. "Use those brains you're so proud of."

"If I have to be back by May Day, I'll need luck more than brains."

"Maybe. You will leave first thing in the morning. Sleep well."

Yeah, right.



Just before dawn, I walked into the tiny garden of lacecap hydrangeas and tulips marking the western end of Windsong Park. I'd ventured this far before and knew, though it was still a little too dark to see color, that the tulips were red and yellow. Later, when the hydrangeas bloomed, they'd be blue. I reminded myself to come back sometime and look at these flowers in daylight, so that I could find apt words to describe them.

Moist air caressed my skin; the soft leather of my boots felt warm and reassuring around my ankles and feet. After a few steps, I turned to say a last goodbye to my home.

Not surprisingly, it had disappeared. The wizards kept a glamor, a sort of mist, around the village so that Tykes couldn't see it. However, not many came as far as the West Forest and those who did spent little time there. I'd heard a couple of them talking about it one day as I hid in the branches above, resisting the temptation to drop acorns on their heads. The woman said the Forest seemed spooky and, though the man scoffed, he started glancing around at every little sound. So perhaps the spell was more than just a blinding glamor. Perhaps it conjured ghosts as well. I hoped that turned out to be one of the first spells I learned. It would be just so exciting to become invisible.

As the rich scents of dew-drenched soil and manure reached my nostrils, I begged the sun to rise quickly, so I could see what might be around the next corner. A sudden movement under a hydrangea startled me. A snake! I shuddered in spite of myself. Snakes were simply another race of People and most of them were friendly, but they made me nervous. I could never tell what

direction they'd take, and I didn't want one slithering up my leg, even if he or she was just saying hello.

The snake disappeared without speaking, and I hurried on. After all, I had places to go and a riddle to solve, right? I didn't have time to stop and talk to snakes. Then my steps slowed again. How would I ever figure out what that riddle meant? I'd lain awake half the night, trying to understand it.

I came out of the park onto a brick path leading down to a wide, wooden deck, part of the marina which marked the start of the Windsong trail. I crossed my fingers that trees bordered it all the way, for they would protect me, as they protected anyone belonging to the People of the Trees.

"Petrina! Tree-na Tree-na!"

Who called? Who knew my baby name? Who knew I was here? My heart thumped and possibilities raced through my mind. No Tyke knew my name. But there were other tribes of magic-wise People living close by, so I'd been told. There were People of the Weather, of the Rocks, and of the Sea. But none of those would ever harm me.

Beneath my feet and the cedar planking, water gurgled against the pilings, making small liquid sounds that sounded almost like words. Maybe the water had called me.

I held my breath and cupped my ears, but the sound didn't come again. It might have been a bird, then, singing to the growing light. I wished it would appear on a branch so I could speak properly to it.

On the other hand, it could have been the seal, who I had just noticed. Fat and glossy, it sprawled on the edge of the deck.

"Greetings, Gray Swimmer," I said. Well, I didn't actually say the words out loud. We all learned, very young, how to think words at the furred and feathered People, in a way that made sense to them. And they thought back at us.

The seal stared at me with round, dark eyes. "Good morning, Petra. You'd better tie up those bootlaces or you'll fall flat on your face." She flipped off the deck and slid into the water, then poked her head up once, produced what looked like a smile, and shot like a sleek bullet into the depths.

That smooth exit made me yearn to slip out of my skin and into hers, to feel the world through her senses, to think seal thoughts, to play in the water the way seals did, and then slide back into myself, perhaps a bit wiser for the journey.

I looked down at my boots. The laces were still securely tied. I thought I'd left all the jokers behind me in the village, but apparently not.

One advantage of completing the quest was that I could get rid of my name. 'Petra' and 'Petrina' were Tyke names, the kind given to all younglings to help enable them to pass as Tykes when they went on their first quests. It was much easier, the teachers assured us, to remember a name you'd used since birth rather than one you'd never heard before and only learned at the beginning of a quest.

Past the cedar deck was a short, sharp hill. I scuffed up the path, hurrying to get to the top, so I could see the way ahead. Dirt flew out behind my digging boot toes, spattering audibly on last fall's dead, dry leaves. Out of breath, I stopped, put my hand on the thick, ridged bark of an oak and looked eastward. The bark became warm under my touch, and I patted the friendly tree in response to its silent greeting.

The rectangles of the Tyke City high-rises, a mile and more away, were silhouettes of black against the clear, pearly light of dawn. Suddenly a breeze riffled the bay around which the City

crouched, turning the water into hammered pewter between paws of hard, red brick. The boats in the marina wakened to the push and pull of wavelets with creak of mast and rattle of rigging. Across the strait, delicate wreaths of violet mist draped the dark blue mass of distant mountains.

Delighted with the words I'd used to describe dawn, I memorized them, so they'd be handy when I needed them. Were such descriptions the kind of thing that would move Tykes to be nicer?

Tiny lights studding the high-rises were already fading against the waxing sunlight and made me shiver worse than snakes did, for they were much closer than I'd expected. The only People allowed to go into the City itself were White Wizards and Witches, those who had reached the third and final level of the craft. Only they were well-enough schooled to trade with the fearsome Tykes for goods that we needed. I'd been taught that Tykes were ill-educated and terrified of magic, and I'd also heard that when they caught one of us, horrible things happened.

Below me, the bare, gnarled branches of an enormous Garry oak spread over a little cove. Fat gray buds covered the network of branches, promising leaves that would form a broad green umbrella in summer. An arbutus tree on the other side of the cove already wore clusters of creamy bell-shaped flowers. As suddenly as it had come, the breeze vanished and the sea stilled, turning a smooth, shining gold as it reflected the first rays of the sun.

I walked on through the trees. To my left, the land sloped sharply upward under a canopy of willows unfurling new green leaves. Scattered beneath the willows were fawn lilies, delicate white flowers shyly looking down at their toes. The petals looked so soft and silken that I wanted to pick a flower, hold it in my hand, caress it.

"Don't even think about it!" The lily's thought sounded crabby.

Was everybody going to be a smartass this morning? "I'll think about it all I want, but you can relax; you know I won't actually do it!"

"Oh," she said. "I didn't realize. You're one of the Tree People."

The narrow twisting path led me farther up a hill, to a bench at the crest. I sat down, feeling more confident now. Young, bare-branched oak trees marched down the steep slope below toward an ocean of sparkling blue. Just above the water line lay a flat granite outcrop, making a perfect table where seagulls could eat the oysters and clams they'd dropped there. Broken seashells were scattered across it.

"Good morning, Gray-Eyed Walker."

Startled, I looked up, hoping I wouldn't have to deal with a Tyke so early in my journey. But it was a belted kingfisher, sitting in a young arbutus, blue-gray plumage and bushy crest glowing in the long rays of the rising sun.

"Good morning, Kingfisher. What news?"

"None this early, youngling. The Tykes are still at their coffee. And I am still at my breakfast." With a harsh, rattling laugh, he spread his wings and skimmed the treetops down to the water. There, he hovered for a moment on rapidly beating wings, plunged headfirst into the water, emerging with a silvery fish in his long bill, and landed on the granite table.

I strode onward, downhill, and around a couple of curves. If any belligerent Tykes came along, I could just leap into the bushes and hide, though it did occur to me that leather hiking boots might be a trifle heavy for fast leaping.

Abruptly the path became smooth rock instead of Tyke-made pavement, sloping gently to a long, narrow, metal bridge across the shallows. To the left, a cliff rose sheer for forty feet, topped by tall firs topped by blue herons, stretching their wings, and preening their long frowzy feathers.

I gave no more thought to the granite path until it treacherously tripped me up at the steepest



part and I fell down, down, down, scraping my palms, my wrists and arms, my knees. I slid to a stop almost at the bridge and lay there, stunned. What was I doing down on the ground? How could I have fallen?

Then came hurrying footsteps, hands picking me up and brushing me off, worried voices wanting to know if I was hurt.

I couldn't speak. Some of these voices belonged to Tykes. I could smell cinnamon and wood smoke, the strong scent that marked all Tykes.

But I did hurt. All over. My scraped knees and my cut palms, and worse, my trust in the cleverness of my feet and the strength of my boots and been wounded. My arm was bleeding, the drops sliding down my fingers, staining the rock.

A deep, male voice spoke, as if addressing a small child. "Owie? Owie?" I forced myself to focus on the source. A young man, blond hair in tight curls forming a halo around his eager face, his hopeful blue eyes. Was he Tyke or one of the People?

He tucked my arm through his. "Come home with me and I'll fix you up."

I was too frightened, too shocked, to do anything but let him lead me away. By the time I'd pulled myself together enough to think of running, I realized this man smelled of earth, not smoke or spice.



"My name is Bran," the man said, as he put a cup of mint tea before me, then washed the blood off my scraped arm. I was sitting on a hard chair at a kitchen table, with only a blurred memory of getting there. I didn't want to be there; I wanted to be striding down the Windsong, strong and capable, even unafraid if I could manage it. But at least it was one of the People taking care of me.

"You're named for Raven?"

He nodded his curly head. "It's the name I chose for myself, when I reached the third level." He smiled. "My people say it's fitting." He taped a bandage over the scrape on my forearm.

His words were friendly, but I couldn't totally trust anyone named for Raven, especially if that's who he was like. Raven played tricks, just like young wizards, and had a reputation for being fickle and unpredictable. He was supposed to be benevolent toward the People but, with Raven, you never knew.

While Bran put the bandages and ointment away, I looked around the room. Hanging on the wall was a carving, from wood that looked like cedar, of a rattlesnake, coiled and ready to strike. That confirmed my suspicions.

"You're of the Rock People, aren't you?" I asked.

He smiled wider, this time revealing slightly pointed eye teeth. "Yes, and you are of the Forest People, for I smell pine. You appear young enough to be on your first quest."

My head drooped, and I felt my body sliding toward sleep. I jerked upright. Had Bran put something in the tea I'd drunk?

"You need rest!" Bran exclaimed. "Here, come and lie on my couch."

I struggled against the drowsiness, but Bran gently eased my body down onto the couch, which was wildly patterned with huge flowers, and tucked a pillow under my head. I was fighting the final portal into sleep when I felt his hands on my boots.

"No!" I struggled awake and gripped his wrists. "Leave the boots alone. If you don't want them on your couch, put my jacket under them, or a towel. Anything you like, but my boots stay

on." Fear fought with the urge to sleep. Named for raven or no, why would one of the magic-wise People try to take away my protection?

He looked at me for a moment, then smiled. "Temper, temper! You're a witchling, I see, not a wizardling. What's your name?"

"Petra." He could do what he liked with that; there was no power in Tyke names.

His smile became warmer. "Petra means 'rock.' You could be one of us with a name like that. Was your mother or father of the Rock People?"

I didn't answer. If he thought I had some connection to his tribe, perhaps he'd leave me alone. On the other hand, maybe I should talk and keep myself awake. But the internal argument was useless; I fell asleep before I could resolve it.

When I woke, my face was buried in the back of the couch, right in the middle of an enormous red poppy. I wriggled my toes, intensely relieved to feel my feet still cradled in the boots. The little house was silent except for a scritch, scritch, scritch in the wall behind the couch. I raised my head so that I could listen with both ears.

"You're hearing carpenter ants," Bran said.

I rolled over to face the room. He was sitting in an old chair which was upholstered, like the couch, with faded, sagging red poppies and blue daisies, and he held a book. I squinted. It was *The Source* by James Michener. Archeology. Would he turn me into a dig and find my deepest secrets?

"Where will you live when the ants eat up your house?" I asked.

"They won't," Bran said. "I'll do something about them first. Give them other kinds of food to eat, perhaps." He bared his pointed teeth. "I'm quite good at arranging things, you know."

A shiver went down my back and my muscles tensed. Was he threatening me? Was he saying that I had to obey him? While I fought with my fear, trying to wake up fully, wondering if I had the strength to run, he went into the kitchen. When he brought each of us a ham omelet sprinkled with sharp cheddar, my hunger made me forget everything else. I sat up and began to eat. The eggs were soft on my tongue, the ham salty, the cheese biting. My mouth was happy.

A tiny gray mouse ran from behind the basket of wood beside the fireplace and shot into the kitchen. Startled, I dropped the fork.

Bran brought me a clean fork. "You'll get used to them," he said. "I might ask them to eat the carpenter ants."

I finished the omelet. "Thank you. That was delicious."

"I knew you'd like it. Now, come and get into the tub. The hot water will take away the ache in your sore muscles." He led me into a tiny bathroom with a roof that sloped down to just above the deep claw-foot tub. "Shall I stay and scrub your back? I can help you off with your boots."

Bran's smile was benevolent, even innocent. But I still did not trust him.

"No, thanks." Being in that tub, with the roof pressing down on one side, and Bran bending over me on the other, seemed like a helpless place to be.

When he'd gone, I slid the bolt home, hoping he couldn't magic it open. I'd lost confidence in my boots, and it seemed highly unlikely that I could outwit someone who'd reached white wizard level. Bran might be one of the People, but he was a mischief-maker and, for some reason, he wanted my boots. Did he know they were spelled for protection and want them for himself? Or did he just want to take them and taunt me when I was completely helpless? I glanced at the window, hoping I could escape that way, but it was barely big enough to let my head through.

I sat in the tub with my legs hanging over the side, to keep the boots dry, and let the hot water soothe my bruises. When I was dry and fully clothed again, I felt more confident. And

more frightened, too.

It would be foolish to pretend confidence in front of a mischief-maker like Bran, but I was determined to escape being his archeological dig. Behind the confidence was anger that my teachers hadn't warned me that there were malicious people like Bran in the other tribes. They'd led us to believe we were one big happy family with a common purpose.

Bran was waiting for me in his big chair. "Come into the garden," he said. "The sun is shining and my flowers will be calling the bees."

He led me past the ant restaurant, through a door which opened on a jungle of bright, tangled shrubs and flowers stretching as far as I could see in every direction. If the place was enchanted, what could I do? I knew only simple magic, nothing about countering spells cast by others.

Bran took my hand and led me to a garden bench among tulips and daffodils. A mattress covered in green corduroy cushioned the bench. He let go of my hand and peeled off his shirt. Then he began to undo the buckle of his belt.

"What are you doing?" But I knew what he was doing; I'd grown up among teenaged wizardlings. There might be a way out of this after all.

He smiled. "I'm going to give you a gift. Everything you could want."

He had no idea what I wanted. He simply intended to take from me what *he* wanted. I had a choice, naturally. I could make the decision to accept his offer, lie on the bench with him, and learn if I liked his gift. It might be good.

But he'd have the boots off me, and they were the only power I possessed.

"I'm not sure what I want," I said, running one finger down his bare, tanned arm to make him think I was considering his gift. "You're very handsome, though. And you have a beautiful tan."

When his jeans fell, crumpling around his ankles, I swiveled, ran back into the house, grabbed my pack and jean jacket, and flung open the front door.

On the single concrete step lay a tangle of snakes.

Panic shot like a searing bullet from my brain to the pit of my gut and I gripped the door jambs with fear-sweated palms. I heard Bran's footfalls behind me, felt the fingers of his hand brush my shoulder as I leapt forward.

The snakes vanished before my feet landed.

I slammed the door, not caring if Bran's fingers got caught or his nose got bashed, and soon found myself back on the Windsong trail. I ran until my lungs ached, until my legs wanted to fold under me, until I'd reached the ocean. Unable to run farther, I put my arms around a small oak and gasped for air.

"Hang on, sweetie," the oak thought at me. "You'll be all right."

For a few minutes I stayed there. I was relieved because I'd escaped from Bran. But I felt guilty, too, because I was as bad as a Tyke. I'd been so frightened that I was willing to let Bran be hurt.



Luck, and the oak, gave me some breathing space. Bran did not come roaring down the path and, gradually, my heart slowed and my mind calmed.

Letting go of the tree, I walked down to the water. The tide was high, and my first thought was an idea that I'd often had before. I wanted the waves to stay still for a little while, so I could examine them in detail and listen to what they had to tell me. There was magic in water, as there

was in everything.

I had the same question about time. If the minutes would stop, I could see what they really looked like. I could remain in each instant of time while it stood still, and the rest of time flowed around it. I'd look at it, and study it, and remember it forever. Then I'd move on to the next one.

But I'd been told this wouldn't work, that both time and tide had their own rules, and neither would consent to stand still for me, no matter how many spells I learned. The sun and moon would continue to cross the sky and the tide would keep falling and rising, rising and falling.

I hated to think my idea was just a dream. Surely, when I was a white witch, I'd find some way to make water and time obey me.

By the time I'd walked to the next small inlet, the tide was beginning to ebb, the water slack and lapping gently against the seawall. Seaweed stalks undulated beneath the surface and, a few yards farther out, seagulls floated on the shining swells.

Seaweed was interesting, the way it grew underwater and left only a few brown bulbs floating on the surface. No matter whether it floated in calm seas or was blown and battered against the rocks, it never changed its opinions, though. I whispered a thought greeting to the nearest bulb, which responded with a trill of bubbles.

Time to try solving the riddle again. Could it be time Ravenna meant me to search for? Time was invisible, tasteless, and formless, but could touch me in the sense that I would grow old as it passed. I couldn't touch it. I didn't know how to make time and, even if I could, it was not something I was able to bring home to the tribe.

I gave up on the riddle and went back to watching what was happening around me. A float plane curved in from the southwest and glided down to land on the bay. I knew a Tyke would be flying it, for the People did not concern themselves with human technology. Why bother, when we could do as much with magic? Once I solved that damn riddle, I could learn to do such magic. But it was hard to concentrate; everything here was so new.

The engine slowed to a purr and the metal bird cut a low swath through bright water toward the City docks. The sound of hammering came across the water; men were working on a tall unfinished building. Tykes were moving, doing things. I wriggled my toes in my boots and crossed my fingers that none of them would notice me. I wasn't quite ready to risk that yet.

The birds were busy, too. A hundred feet away, two blue herons fought in the shallows, squawking like rusty hinges. They half-spread their wings and jabbed at each other with long beaks, rising out of the water a foot or two each time they attacked. After a couple of rounds, one retreated, slow and careful, wings still spread. The other followed, also with wings spread, but more slowly. Within a few minutes, both sets of wings had been smoothed back into place. The loser kept wading away, and the winner followed for another twenty feet, then went off at an angle, finally circling back to the center of his territory. The loser made his slow, lumbering way into the air and flew west, seeking territory that could be more easily won.

I was pleased with how I'd described what the herons were doing and memorized those words, too. Someday I could use them to teach Tykes to let herons live their lives in peace. Or did Tykes hassle herons like they did other peoples? I couldn't remember if I'd ever been told.

Frustrated that I didn't know as much as I'd thought, I turned quickly toward the east and strode out, without paying attention to where I put my feet.

And nearly tripped over a bench where a Tyke was sitting.



She was looking out to sea, but the thud of my toe against the bench made her turn her head toward me. I was surprised when she smiled warmly.

"Come and sit by me," she said. "It's a nice day for a chat."

I didn't want to chat; my palms were sweating with fear. But how could I refuse? I'd been told that some Tykes flew into a rage when they were crossed. If this was a test, I had to ace it.

"My name is Carmela," she said. Thick, black hair in dreadlocks hung down to her waist. Her eyes were brown and lively, her skin dark brown and smooth. She looked relaxed, at ease with the world. I couldn't imagine her flying into a rage and my heart settled down again, though my muscles were tensed, and I was ready to run if I had to.

"You work, honey?" Carmela asked.

"Not yet. I just got out of school."

She asked me what I'd learned in school and what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I mumbled a few things about geography and history, then said I didn't know how to answer the last question.

"I can help," Carmela said. "I feel sorry for you young ones, set adrift to find your own way in a world that has so many different ways to go. I'll tell your fortune."

"You will?" That surprised me. The People did not tell fortunes for each other. We created our own fates.

She smiled at my surprise. "Of course! I can do magic."

Magic? Her? But she was a Tyke; I could smell her. And Tykes didn't do magic. They couldn't.

Carmela continued. "I follow Obeah. It is dark magic, but I use it for good."

I was sure she couldn't tell me anything, but I would go along with her idea. "I'd like that. But I have no money; I can't pay you."

"That doesn't matter." She reached for my hand.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I'd expected to meet Tykes, yes. But to have to touch one? Never!

She gave me a look of sympathy. "You're nervous, aren't you, honey? But hearing your fortune won't hurt. I'm sure it will be a good one." She took my hand.

To my surprise, her hand felt warm and gentle. I'd gotten the impression that all Tykes were stupid or fierce or both. But this one didn't seem to be that way. I began to relax.

Carmela was silent for a long minute, and I wondered what she thought she could read. Or maybe Obeah was stronger than I'd been told.

Finally, she said, "You have some kind of power yourself. Did you know?"

I shook my head, looking at her with wide eyes, as if surprised.

"Your fate is good. You will achieve your heart's desire," Carmela said.

I wanted to believe her, but I didn't. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"No." She let go of my hand. "No, honey. Be happy with that. It will come, sooner or later." She looked at her wristwatch. "I have to go, gotta meet up with my man."

"Thank you!" I was relieved, even happy, that my first contact with a Tyke had turned out so well and I wanted to show gratitude. I also wondered if she'd seen more than she should and suspected I was magic-wise.

But her last smile was just as warm as her first. She rested her hand on my shoulder for a second or two, then strolled off toward the City.

For a while, I stayed on the bench, looking at the sea, wishing Carmela would return so I could practice more conversation with a Tyke. But she didn't, so I got up and set my feet back on

the Windsong.

A gust of wind came swirling in off the ocean and whipped my hair into my eyes. Was that a clue? Could it be the wind I was to take home? No, that wouldn't work. I could feel the wind touching me, therefore I must be touching it. Besides, the wind was too powerful to be taken anywhere, even by a third level witch or wizard.

Around the next curve a low hill rose, sloping up to a grove of arbutus trees. The hill itself was treeless, but the trees were near enough if I needed their help. The slope was thick with tall brown grass and the bright smiles of dandelions peeping out between the stalks. I lay down in the grass to think about the riddle, my head pillowed on my jean jacket. For a moment I felt disembodied, as though I was dreaming. Or wandering around in somebody else's dream.

I turned on my side, one arm cradled around my head, my face turned toward my arm. My eyelashes tickled the inner skin of my arm. I decided that, after all, I wasn't a hallucination.

"Clever girl!" said a dandelion. "Why aren't you clever enough to solve the riddle?"

"If you're so smart, you solve it!" I exclaimed out loud.

The dandelion snickered.

I clapped my hand over my mouth. How could I have been so stupid as to speak out loud? If any Tykes heard me talking to a flower, they'd know I was one of the magic-wise. I said silently to the dandelion, "Shut up! You're going to get me into trouble." Then I rolled away, to lie on my back and look up at the sky.

A jet passed overhead, spewing a contrail that was brilliant white against the blue sky. It looked like a piece of the fairyland I'd imagined when I was very young. The movement of air had crocheted trillions of white pearls into a delicate lace scarf with bobbles evenly spaced along one side. Just below it, ghostly silver-gold in the sunlight, was the half moon. It was so lovely that my eyes filled with tears.

I stood up, blinked, and shook out the jacket. I wouldn't solve any riddles sitting around staring at the sky. I hit the trail at a trot.



Around the next sharp curve of the trail, I nearly crashed into another Tyke, who was standing beside a retaining wall. I went weak with terror, for this was a man, very tall, with a gray brush cut and a strong smell of cinnamon and wood smoke.

I stopped, laced my fingers behind my back, and spoke the protection spell in my head. "Sun rays, spring days, save me in all ways!"

Then I realized he was very thin and pale, and walked with two crutches, and I caught my breath as I prepared to walk past him.

"You like the walkway?" the man asked, smiling at me.

"There's nothing better," I lied.

"That's what I think, too," he said, nodding.

He obviously wanted to talk, and I needed all the experience I could get in dealing with Tykes, so I'd go along with the gig. But I asked him questions to keep him from asking me any. He said his name was Jackson, that he was retired, and lived in the pink apartment building.

"What apartment building?" How could there be buildings in the Park?

He pointed and I saw, a hundred yards away, a tall pink building, sprouting orderly rows of balconies, seven across, twelve down. "The Park is quite narrow at this particular point," he said. "The City would eat up all the green area if we let it."

Odd that a Tyke would regard the City as a beast the same as I did. "What are you retired from?" I asked, remembering that Tykes generally worked at one job for several years, and in their gray years, did nothing but play.

"I was a high school math teacher on the Cabot Trail for a long time. I don't think about it anymore."

"What do you do now?"

He grinned. "I play poker and collect women."

My chin came up. "You can't collect me!"

"Women my own age," he said gently. He looked at me for a minute and then said, "Do you like games? Would you like to play poker? I'd be happy to teach you."

I thought about his offer. He was apparently really looking for company. He might say something that would help me in my search. "Sure."

He pointed at steps that led up to a path winding toward the pink building. "Come on up to my apartment. I'll make some coffee and give you your first lesson. Or perhaps you would prefer tea."

The terror shook me again. Go into a Tyke's house? I might never escape!

A large cat, with thick, short, blue-gray fur, jumped down from the retaining wall. "Get your butt in gear," the cat thought at me. "He'll have food in there and I'm hungry."

I was so surprised that I didn't know what to say.

"Move it!" said the cat.

I moved it. We followed Jackson in his slow progress along the path and into the building, then up in the elevator and down a long, dark hall to his door. I didn't like being trapped in such a huge, complicated box, but so far nothing bad had happened. When we were inside his apartment and I had a chance to look around, I got brave enough to ask where he kept his collection of women.

Jackson gave me a puzzled look. "Oh, they don't live with me. They each have their own apartment. I couldn't afford to feed them all."

The cat said, "He can afford to feed me." Then it meowed.

Jackson glanced down. "Oh, I didn't know you had a cat."

The cat rubbed against my leg and meowed again.

"Her name is Fluffy," I said.

"You will pay dearly for that," said the cat. It rubbed against Jackson's leg, gave him a pathetic look from big yellow eyes, and meowed again.

"She must be hungry," Jackson said. "I'll bet you forgot to feed her this morning." He didn't wait for a reply but went to a cupboard and took out a small tin of tuna. The cat began to purr. The purr went into overdrive when Jackson opened the tin and put the fish in a bowl for her.

With that taken care of, Jackson brought out a deck of cards and a box of toothpicks. We sat at his dining room table, and he taught me blackjack and five-card stud and a couple of other poker games. Naturally, with several eons more brain development and life experience than Tykes, the People do learn quickly, and I was no exception.

Jackson seemed amazed at how fast I caught on. "You're a natural," he said, looking at the pile of toothpicks on my side of the table. "I have a date tonight, but I'd like to have a game tomorrow night. Will you come?"

I agreed. If he was a teacher, he might be able to help solve the riddle.

The cat followed me into the elevator and all the way back to the Windsong. It followed me down a side path, where I found nothing of interest. In fact, for the rest of the day, it acted as if

tied to my ankles, but refused to speak again until I tried to throw a ball of light for it to chase. The ball of light disintegrated on the first grass blade it hit.

"Not very adept, are you?" sneered the cat.

"The only course I've taken so far is Telekinesis for Beginners."

"That figures." It followed me up the oak tree where I intended to spend the night.

The yellow eyes examined my perch. "This will do very well." It sat on a broad branch and curled its tail around its front feet. "Now, let's get a few things straight. My name is Blue and I'm a male." His eyes glowed in the gathering dusk. "I will add, as a warning, that I have a nickname. It's Killer."

"I apologize for the Fluffy bit."

"I appreciate your apology." Blue stared at me for a moment. "In my opinion, you will be quite acceptable once you've learned your place. Therefore, I've decided you will be my familiar."

"*Your* familiar! Don't you have that backwards?"

"I am Cat," he said haughtily. "I choose who will serve me. You People are often so arrogant that you believe you're in charge, but you're not."

"Why did you pick me?"

"You smell right," said Blue, "and you appear to be trainable. I do understand that you have duties to your People, so I won't overburden you unless it's necessary."

Well, that seemed to be that. Aunt Ravenna couldn't scold me for getting a familiar, since it hadn't been my decision. In any case, Blue seemed to think I was his familiar. Perhaps Ravenna would explain this anomaly.

When it was as dark as it was going to get, what with stars and streetlights, the oak told me to climb higher. There I found a comfortable nook where several branches met and curled up in it. Blue curled up in the curve of my stomach and purred. I didn't want to admit it, but I felt like purring myself.



When I arrived at Jackson's the next evening, I was shocked to discover that he'd invited two friends, Fred, and Charlie. Three Tykes! What would I do if they turned nasty? I'd asked Blue to come up to the apartment with me, but he said he had better things to do, so I was on my own. I took several deep breaths and examined the three men carefully. They were old and appeared harmless, but how could I know for sure?

As Jackson dealt the first round, he told his friends they'd better be careful, or I'd win all their money. That was the first time I realized they played for money, not toothpicks. My turn to bet came around and I put the cards down.

"I'm sorry, Jackson, but I don't have any money with me. I thought these games were played for toothpicks."

Fred and Charlie laughed and teased me about being a cheapskate, but Jackson opened his wallet and handed me some paper money. "You can pay me back tomorrow, or whenever you get some cash," he said.

I thanked him, surprised at how friendly he was being. This was not what I'd expected from Tykes. Perhaps some of them weren't so bad after all.

We played for a while. I was careful to lose sometimes so that I didn't win all the money lying on the table. But it was difficult to hold myself in check and finally I said that my head



hurt, and I'd like to take a break.

Jackson said, "Go out on the balcony and get some fresh air. We'll play a couple of rounds without you."

It was good to stand on his ninth-floor balcony, along with the beans and onions and tomatoes he was growing in pots. The last flames of sunset warmed the distant dark green of the West Forest, and I had a moment of intense longing to be home with my own kind.

This was no time to think about home, though, not if I wanted the green cloak and boots of a first level witch. It was that stupid riddle getting in my way. I stayed out for another few moments, long enough to watch Tyke walkers and runners using the main Windsong path, moving from shadows to yellow lamplight and back again, the marina lights reflecting off the black water. I wondered who the Tykes were and where they'd come from, where they were going, whether they had thoughts at all like mine.

I also wondered where I might get some money. It was only fair to pay Jackson what he'd loaned me and have some of my own to bet with, but the few spells I'd learned did not include creating things out of thin air. I could, of course, win all the money the three Tykes had on the table, but that didn't seem quite fair.

Later that night, Blue joined me as I came out of the pink apartment building and I asked his advice, but he flicked the end of his tail dismissively and said money was not his concern. He didn't need it. It appeared that Ravenna hadn't thought I'd need it either.

Wait a minute! That was a clue. If I didn't need money, then whatever I was to take back to the coven must be free. But I still could not imagine any item that was able to touch me, but which I couldn't touch, and yet could carry home with me.

In the morning, Blue went off on a hunting expedition and I went to sit on a bench to watch the ocean, my backpack beside me. I had noticed Tykes often plumped down there to do the same thing. First, a woman perched on the edge of the seat, ignoring me in a way that suggested I was trespassing on her private territory. When she left after a few minutes, I had to wait another half hour before a man in a suit came along and smiled at me as he sat. I knew now what wallets looked like and I could see the outline of his in his back pocket.

A gray squirrel was exploring the big concrete tub of petunias beside the guard rail. I sent him a thought. "Greetings, Tail-Flicker! Can I persuade you to play a joke on this Tyke beside me?"

The squirrel looked at me, eyes bright, tail flicking. "Got any food?"

"Yes, and I'll share. But after you do the joke."

He gave a slight nod.

I asked him to hang by his tail from the guardrail and reach for a petunia blossom. He bounced up to the guardrail and did as I asked.

"Oh, look at that!" the man said, and began to chortle.

While he laughed, I easily slid the wallet out of his pocket and into my backpack. The man leaned back. "Never seen a bushy-tail do that before! I wonder where he learned it. They're clever little thieves, aren't they?"

"They certainly are." I sent Tail-Flicker another message. "Now run along the top of the guardrail and stand on your head at the far end."

"That's gonna cost you," he said.

"Not a problem." The squirrel ran, flipped up on his head, then capped that by doing a handstand. While he was showing off, I slid the money out of the Tyke's wallet, and a biscuit out of my food stores.

The Tyke laughed again. While he was leaning forward, enjoying the squirrel's antics, I slipped the wallet back into his pocket.

The squirrel jumped off the guardrail, came over, and stared at me. I broke up the biscuit and tossed the pieces in front of him.

"One at a time," he scolded, "one at a time! I hate fighting off seagulls."

"Sorry."

"Well, don't do it again."

The squirrel got most of the biscuit before the gulls swooped in. The Tyke glanced at his watch and said, "Oops, I'm going to be late for work." He rose and headed off in the direction of The City, still smiling.

I wasn't smiling. I had committed theft, which is something the People don't do. But I justified it by remembering that Tykes were obsessed with money and perhaps this event would teach him it wasn't very important. It certainly didn't look important, though I'd been told it was essential to their system of trading.

It would be absolutely essential never to let that man see me again. The next time he opened his wallet, he'd probably remember sitting next to me while a squirrel did tricks. I'd just have to avoid sitting out in view when Tykes were going to their work.



That evening, I played poker with Jackson and his friends again. This time, I let them win a little money from me. They seemed delighted and made comments about beginner's luck and how it never lasted.

After Fred and Charlie left, earlier than they had the night before, Jackson said, "Come out and sit on the balcony for a few minutes and we'll watch the sunset." He had a couple of deck chairs out there.

Blue would be waiting for me downstairs, but I could spare a little time.

As soon as we sat down and Jackson had propped his crutches against the railing, he said, "You're a witch, aren't you?"

I leapt up, knocking over my deck chair, and jumped toward the open door.

"Hey, Petra! It's all right," Jackson said. "I don't care what you are. I have no quarrel with witches or magic. I have no quarrel with anybody. I'm just curious."

I stopped in the doorway, still ready to run. If I had to escape, I'd go down the fire escape, not the elevator or stairs. But he'd been good to me, so why not tell him? "Yes, I am. How did you guess?"

He smiled. "You had no money. You didn't answer when I asked where you live. And you didn't seem to understand that I was joking when I talked about my collection of women."

"I guess I have a lot to learn. I'm on my first quest and I'd never met any Tykes before I came to the Windsong."

"Tykes?"

"That's what the People call humans."

Jackson thought about that for a minute. "Okay, I understand the reason, though it's not very complimentary. A lot of us lack maturity, right?"

"So I've been taught. Now I have a question for you. Why did you leave the Cabot Trail?" Wherever that was.

"Because I'm selfish, I suppose," said Jackson. "I was sick of teaching and sick of being

married, though my wife is a great person. And sick of being a father. Now I can do whatever I want, whenever I want."

It seemed to me that he was indeed selfish and evading his responsibilities. Tykes were well known for being irresponsible. "Doesn't your family need you?"

"No. My wife is happier without me. My two children were grown up long ago, but never seemed able to make their own decisions. Now that I'm gone, they have to take charge of their lives and I think that's good for them."

"What about the teaching?" I asked. "Shouldn't you continue to impart your knowledge to the young?"

Jackson smiled. "There are plenty of teachers doing that. Not all of them can even find jobs these days. Besides, I was due for retirement."

He liked teaching, for he'd obviously enjoyed explaining the rules of poker to me. But he wasn't paying any attention to my hints about responsibility, so perhaps he didn't like being taught. Or perhaps he thought he already knew everything. Tykes had that reputation, too.

I gave a guilty little start. I'd started out on this quest thinking I knew everything, too.

"So, is this collection of women just a joke?"

"Not altogether," Jackson said. "I always have a lady friend to go walking with and to sleep with. But most of them, when they find out I'm not interested in marriage, go away and start looking for someone who does want it."

"Don't they get angry?" I wondered if Bran had been angry with me for refusing him and running away.

"No, why should they? I don't tell them lies."

"Do they stay friends with you?"

"Talking friends," Jackson said, "not bed friends."

On the whole, he seemed like a reasonable sort of Tyke. Certainly not what I'd been led to expect. "Can I ask another question?"

"Sure. Ask away."

I told him about my quest and that, if I succeeded, it would let me into witchery school, which I wanted more than anything. Then I repeated the riddle to him. "I haven't been able to figure out what it means."

Jackson stared out at the darkness. Finally, he shook his head. "No, I don't understand the riddle either. But I'll give it more thought. You'll still come and play poker with us, won't you? I promise I won't tell anyone else who you are. I enjoy your company. And I like your kindness in not winning all our money."

"How did you know I was holding back?"

He laughed. "I've been playing poker for many years and experience teaches you things you can't learn any other way. Not to mention the hands you've tossed in that you should have bet on. You'll have to be careful with that, or Fred and Charlie will catch on."

His blathering about experience sounded like Aunt Ravenna. I was beginning to think maybe they were right.

I was sure, then, that I could trust Jackson, and I liked the poker games, so I went every time he asked me. When Blue wanted tuna, he'd come up to the apartment with me and work the feline brand of magic. The days slipped by, as I explored the trails in the park, meditated on the riddle, and provided Blue with a warm mattress at night.

Jackson was definitely a collector, though I didn't understand the attraction. Aside from his women, none of whom I ever met, he collected huge yellow maples leaves. He said that every

time he visited the Cabot Trail, he brought some back. He ironed each leaf between sheets of waxed paper to preserve them, then pinned them up on his walls. They made me think of Bran and wonder if he had assumed he could collect me for the price of a ham and cheese omelet.

We Forest People don't collect things. Then I remembered that, in the fall, we collect nuts and mushrooms. But we don't keep them; we eat them all during the winter when it's impossible to get them fresh.

One evening, Jackson happened to mention that the date was April 28 and he had only two days left to file his income tax return. I was about to ask him what an income tax return was when I realized I had only two days left myself. I couldn't believe how fast the time had passed. Aunt Ravenna had given me a month and a day to complete my quest and I couldn't point to one single thing I'd accomplished toward solving the riddle. And now I had run out of time. I was so disappointed in myself that I lost most of my money, without even trying, to the three men.

When the game packed up, Jackson asked me to stay for a minute. As the door closed on Fred and Charlie, Jackson said, "What's wrong? Tonight, you seemed to be off on another planet."

"Planet?"

"A figurative statement," Jackson said patiently. "You weren't concentrating."

"Oh. Yes." I explained that I had only two days left to complete my quest and one of them had to be spent getting back to West Forest.

"It's this riddle that's the problem," he said. "If you had the answer to that, then you'd know what to do."

No kidding!

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll meet you in the morning on the Windsong, where we first met. Okay?" At my nod, he continued. "We'll find a deserted bench somewhere and brainstorm the riddle."

"Brainstorm?"

"Think hard about it. Kick ideas around," Jackson said.

"Okay." I couldn't think of anything better to do.



Jackson and I spent all of my second-last day working on the riddle. He'd even made cheese sandwiches for a mid-day meal and remembered to bring a container of tuna for Blue. For hours, we tossed suggestions at each other, and one by one, rejected them. Brainstorming, he called it. An apt name; I had a storm in my brain all day.

Finally, I said, "I've learned a lot from this journey, and learned a lot from Tykes, but I've failed my quest." I'd found Blue, though, or he'd found me, and I'd never expected that to happen.

"What will your elders do to you?" Jackson asked.

"I don't know. I've never heard of anyone failing a quest. Maybe it'll just be a delay. I can't get into witchery school until I succeed in a quest, and I'll have to wait for my aunt to dream up another riddle, I suppose." I rose from the bench. "Shall we go play poker one last time?" I couldn't talk about the quest anymore, or I might disgrace myself by bursting into tears.

"Sounds like a plan," Jackson said.

When I left his place, later that night, he hugged me, and I didn't even wince at the smell. Then he stood back, leaning on his crutches, and said, "I'm going to miss you. Do you think you'll be back this way?"

"I hope so. I'll try. But I simply have no idea what's going to happen."

Before Blue and I climbed the oak for our last night in the branches, I knelt in the grass beside the tree, and ran my fingers through soft, moist, green blades. Tears slid down my cheeks and the sadness was overwhelming. I wanted so badly to escape the shame of going home as a failure. If only I could become the grass, then become the soil the grass called home, and live there forever, unknown and unmourned, I'd do it.

Blue called from the upper branches, "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and get your butt up this tree. We've got some walking to do tomorrow."



Though we rose at dawn, by the time we'd reached the bridge across the shallows and saw the cliff with the fir trees and herons, the sun had slipped far down in the afternoon sky. I'd never expected to see Bran again, but he stood on the slope of granite where I'd fallen, his blond curls around his head like a halo.

"Enjoy the journey?" he asked.

"It's been good." I wouldn't tell him I'd failed in my quest. Then I realized that something strange had happened. I was no longer afraid of him or his snakes.

"Did you succeed with your quest?"

I nodded and waved a hand at Blue, who was sniffing around at the grass beside the granite slope. "My familiar." Bran would know that having a familiar meant I'd done what I was sent to do. Blue opened his yellow eyes wide and glared at me. I knew I'd pay for my remark later.

Bran looked amused. "Liar."

"Well, I'll succeed with the next quest!"

"Good luck! And I'll see you later."

"Not if I see you first," I said.

Bran laughed and I watched him walk away across the bridge. I wanted to see where he turned off the trail in case I decided to visit him someday. But, at the very moment I blinked, he vanished.

The sadness came back. I was a failure and Aunt Ravenna would be horribly disappointed in me. So would everyone else in the coven. In fact, I would be notorious now, the only witchling to ever fail her first quest, in spite of all those top marks I'd earned.

I arrived at the little cove under the immense Garry oak and looked into the clear water. There was still hope; the water might have an answer for me. I slid down the steep bank and found the cove was shallow; I was wet only to my knees. The water felt cool as it trickled down inside my boots to cover my toes, gentle and caressing, but it spoke not a single word. I bent to touch the rocks below the surface, and they felt solid and settled. They would only say that they'd be there for eons and were looking forward to the day they became sand.

Well, I'd tried. I waded around the west arm of the tiny cove and climbed up to the path. Another few steps and I was back on the cedar deck that marked the beginning of the Windsong. As I walked across it, a gray seal heaved itself out of the water onto the deck. "Welcome home!"

"Thanks! Good to be here." It was good right now this minute, but I couldn't bear to think of what might be awaiting me in the coven.

From the oaks on the hill above, a bird murmured, "Tree-na! Tree-na! Tree-na!"

There was that Tyke name again, which I'd have to put up with until I came home successful from a quest I could handle.

The sun laid a golden strip of fire on the horizon, separating misty sea from milky sky. I was almost home. I walked through the little garden, sat down, and took off my boots. After tying the laces together, I slung them over my shoulder, and went on barefoot toward the village.

At least I'd got one thing right. The Beltane celebration was tomorrow, and I was back in time to share in it. Unless I had to spend the next three years in my room. A sudden horrible thought hit me. Maybe the coven would exile me.



I tried to tiptoe past Ravenna's cottage, but that didn't work. She burst out through the door and hugged me, boots and all, tightly to her breast. "You wicked child; I thought you were going to be late."

When she let me go and I could breathe again, I said, "I'm glad to see you, but I have something terrible to tell you."

"What?"

"I failed."

There, I'd said it! Now she knew the worst. Now I would wait for whatever punishment was meted out to someone who was so stupid as to actually fail a quest.

Aunt Ravenna raised her eyebrows. "What do you mean, failed?"

It was hard to speak around the lump in my throat. "I didn't solve the riddle. I didn't bring anything home."

Ravenna looked down at Blue, who sat at my feet, his tail wrapped neatly around his blue-gray self. "Who's this then? You seem to have brought home a familiar."

Blue hissed. "Blue is my name, killing my business. Petra is *my* familiar."

My aunt laughed. "That proves my point. Blue wouldn't have chosen you as his familiar if you'd failed. That means you succeeded."

"I thought he picked me because I smelled good."

"Not good," Blue objected. "I never said that. I said you smelled right."

Ravenna drew me into her cottage. Blue followed. "Now," said Aunt Ravenna, "tell me everything that happened to you, everything you did. Don't leave out any details."

I did so. It took some little time.

At the end of my story, Ravenna said, "I can tell you now what you were sent for, and that you've brought it home."

"The only thing I brought home was Blue. And I wasn't sent for him."

"You were sent to find friendship."

"Friendship?" I said blankly.

"Petra, you are entirely too literal-minded for your own good. I asked you to bring home something you could not touch but which could touch you. You built a friendship with a Tyke, and that friendship may help us in the future."

"I still don't understand."

"Friendship is not an object which you can literally touch. But someone's friendship can touch you emotionally."

Light dawned. "That's not fair! That's two different meanings for touch!"

"Both meanings are valid," Blue said snarkily.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I really had been stupid.

Ravenna smiled. "So you see, you haven't failed. You've succeeded."

"You mean I'm going to get my green boots and cape after all? I'm going to witchery school?"

My aunt hugged me again. "You certainly are! Before tomorrow night's final Beltane ceremony, we'll have a separate ceremony for you. That's where you'll receive your true name."

"What is it? Do you know what it is?" I was so excited that my tongue was stumbling over itself. And I was already imagining myself going to visit Jackson and telling him the riddle's answer. He'd be pleased.

"Of course, I know," Ravenna said. "You will be called Briana Cara, which means 'strong friend'."

"Not bad," said Blue. "Not bad. I can live with that name."

So could I.



## WORLD TRAVELER

Grasshopper vaults  
stem to stem,  
leaf to leaf,  
leaps in green arcs  
through blue air,  
tasting  
the whole wide world.  
Sings to the hot sun,  
telling him all about it.



## RA'S REVENGE

"Angus MacDonald, come in here and drink your tea before it's cold!"

Fenella was standing on the back veranda, hands on hips. I knew she must have hollered at me several times already, because she only tacks on MacDonald when she's mad enough to throw something. Trouble is, when I start gardening, I get so wrapped up in it I don't hear anything but those dratted weeds sneaking up through the soil.

I struggled to get up, my knees, elbows and knuckles creaking with arthritis. The vegetable patch looked good, though. I'd just finished trimming the edges, so it was neat as a pin. I'd spaded and raked the fine, black soil, and now all I needed to do was put in some stakes either end and tie string to them so I'd get the rows arrow straight.

"Angus!" Fenella's tone was ominous.

"Ay, I'm coming." I picked up the shoe box full of seed packets from the veranda steps and took it into the kitchen to sort through while I had my tea. Cabbage, peas, beans, zucchini. I'd cut up a few old potatoes and plant them, too. Wee potatoes are a good treat in early summer. The first batch of lettuce, radishes and green onion was already growing in the greenhouse. The luscious pictures on seed packets drive me crazy; it seems to take forever before I can get my teeth into the first radish and the green crunchiness of fresh lettuce.

When I'd finished my tea and the shortbread Fenella makes because it reminds her of her grannie's in Argyle, I stood on the veranda for a minute to look at my yard. It's the trimmest and most productive on the whole block, if I do say so myself. Last fall I gave the greenhouse in the corner a fresh coat of pale green paint, like freshly sprouted grass, and the back fence, too. That's where I'll put the scarlet runner beans. The red blooms will show up a treat against the green. Over in the other corner and all along the front of the house, Fenella plants flowers but I don't dare interfere with that.

A movement in the vegetable patch caught my eye. I opened my mouth and roared, but I was too late. The cat from next door, a gray tabby, had already done his business and was covering it up.

"I'll teach you, you little bugger!" I jumped down the steps, picked up a rock from the edging around Fenella's nasturtium patch and threw it at the cat.

"Angus! There's no need to injure the poor animal." Fenella had come out on the veranda.

The pain was so bad my knees were close to buckling. "I've just ruined my back throwing that rock, Fen. Help me up the steps, I've got to lie down for a bit."

As I hobbled toward the kitchen door, I saw another cat. This one was sitting quite still under the wild currant bush behind the carport which is attached to one end of our house. It was staring at me. One of those fancy Oriental breeds with slanted blue eyes and big ears, lean and cream-colored, except for all the bits on the ends. You know what I mean, the feet, muzzle, ears, and tail. Those were chocolate brown.

"Who does that creature belong to?" I asked.

"Elegant beastie, I must say," said Fenella. "Angus, mind the door sill."



Ten days later, I was still having trouble walking. If I could have got hold of that tabby cat, I'd have brained it. Fenella had to plant my vegetable garden, with me shouting instructions from

a chair on the veranda. She's a good lass but she can't make straight rows worth a hoot. It'll be a miracle if the plants grow, the way she slapped dirt over the seeds. I guess I'll have to live with the crooked rows, too.

Every time we went out back, that cream-colored cat was sitting under the wild currant. It didn't claw anything, or chase birds, or use my garden to mess in. It just sat and stared at me. "What do you suppose it wants?" I asked.

"Haven't a clue," Fenella said, "but it's a pretty animal. I got a book from the library about cats and I'm sure that one's a Siamese. They were first bred by royalty, the book says."

"It better stay out of my garden, or it'll be dog meat."

Fenella drove me to see the doc. I told him I was feeling pretty good, but he didn't believe me and said to take it easy for another week. When we came back, we had a cup of tea on the sundeck, which also happens to be the roof of our carport. With a table, a few garden chairs, and some hanging flower baskets beside the sliding doors, it looks decent enough. I stood at the railing and looked down at the vegetable patch. I couldn't see any green shoots yet, but it was obvious a cat had been digging holes. "That damn tabby has a garden where he lives. Why does he have to come over here and use mine for his toilet?"

"Oh, stop fussing, Angus. Think of it as fertilizer."

"It's no any good for that. Cats are meat-eaters. If I want fertilizer, I'll buy steer manure or rent a cow."

"Well, don't get yourself in such a state. What's done is done."

"Maybe so, but I'm going to keep those animals out of my yard, even if I have to put a fence around the whole thing. It's my yard, not theirs."

I turned from the railing to see that same gray tabby on his belly at the edge of the sundeck. A couple of sparrows were at the bird feeder. "Get out of there, you!" I wanted to throw something. The only thing handy was my teacup and if I broke that, Fenella would kill me. But the cat wasn't taking any chances. He fled back down the trellis I'd built for Fenella a year or two back.

"I'm going to take that trellis down," I grumbled. "Then the beasts won't be able to climb up to the roof."

"No, you're not, Angus. That trellis is for my sweet peas."

When Fenella uses that tone, I know better than to argue. But I still do it. "That's another thing," I said. "The tabby's not the only one that comes up here and kills birds. I've found feathers many a time."

"Well, what do you expect, you great lump?" Fenella said. "You've got the feeders sitting on a table. It's like you're inviting all the neighborhood cats to supper. Why don't you hang the feeders under the eaves where the cats can't reach them?"

"It's my yard; I shouldn't have to hang them up," I muttered.

"Don't be daft. Cats don't recognize boundaries."

We carried the tea things inside. I turned to glance out before I went to the kitchen and there was that cream-colored cat, sitting in the middle of the sundeck. Staring at me. I stuck my head out the door and yelled, "Get away!" The beast didn't even twitch. Just sat there. Staring.

"Stop fussing and sit down," Fenella said. "Rest your back and I'll read some of the cat book to you. When you hear their history, you might respect them more."

"I have no respect for man nor beast that steals from others."

"The cats aren't stealing from you."

"They're stealing my birds and using my space. They're making me spend time cleaning up

after them, too."

"The birds don't belong to you." Fenella picked up her library book and began reading aloud. "Because of their ability to kill snakes, especially cobras, cats in ancient Egypt were revered highly, sometimes given golden jewelry to wear and allowed to eat from the same plates as their owners. Dead and mummified cats were brought for burial in the temple at Per-Bast. More than three hundred thousand were discovered when it was excavated."

"Well, those chaps knew what they were about," I said. "Three hundred thousand is a tidy number."

"You've got it wrong," said Fenella. "The cats died natural deaths." She flipped ahead a couple of pages. "Cats were sacred to Bast, and to harm one was deemed a great sin. People were executed for killing a cat, even if it was accidental."

"Those Egyptians were daft buggers," I said. "We don't execute humans even when they kill other humans."

"Perhaps they did carry it a bit far," Fenella conceded. "Listen to this: when a cat died, the whole family went into mourning, the measure of their personal loss signaled by their shaving off their eyebrows."

"I told you they were daft."

"Not completely," Fenella said. "It says here cats curtailed the spread of disease by killing vermin." She put the book down. "Maybe your tabby friend has been killing rats and mice in our back yard."

"I've never seen vermin out there. Not once."

"That proves the point," Fenella said. "The tabby killed them all. Did you know that, in Egypt, cats had their own goddess?"

There was a hint of satisfaction in her voice. What is it about those fur-covered little pirates that makes women so protective? But this was one of those times I knew it wouldn't pay to ask. Or argue, neither. "You mean they actually had a god to look after cats?"

"A goddess," Fenella said. She began reading again. "In Egyptian mythology, Bast was depicted as a fierce lioness, later as a woman with the head of a cat. She supervised health, music and dancing, crops, hunting, wisdom, and happiness, but she was most famous for her legendary wrath. She was listed as one of Ra's avenging deities who punished the sinful."

"Who was this Ra?"

"I think he was the head god." Fenella turned a page. "It says here that the Book of the Dead mentions the Great Cat Ra."

I glanced out the sliding glass doors to the sun deck. The cream-colored cat was still there. Still staring. It was spooky.

"Well," I said, "Ra, nor Bast neither, has any business in my back yard. Did those fool Egyptians spend all their time worshiping cats? I hope they had some fun."

"Oh, they did, all right, according to this," Fenella said. "They had a festival every October and thousands of men and women traveled to Bast's temple on boats with music, singing and dancing." Fenella adjusted her specs. "When they reached the city, they had processions of flower-laden barges and orgiastic ceremonies and drank as much wine as they could stomach."

"Orgies, is it? Well, I suppose cats are as good an excuse as any. Sensible people don't need any excuses." I got to my feet. "I'm off to the greenhouse. I can do things out there that won't bother my back."



By the time another two weeks passed, my back was healed, and I worked in the garden most of the time. The vegetables were coming along fine but my pleasure was destroyed every day because I had to chase damn cats out of my yard. It wasn't only the gray tabby from next door who trespassed. There were cats of every color and description, sometimes two and three at a time.

I complained about it at the pub on a Saturday afternoon and my friend Lionel suggested I should get a slingshot and fire ice cubes at the cats. Lionel said the ice cubes might sting or even hurt but wouldn't kill the animals. He figured if they got hurt instead of just yelled at, they might stay away.

This sounded like a fine idea; I'd had plenty of practice with slingshots as a boy. Monday, I went downtown and bought a state-of-the-art slingshot. I knew Fenella would kill me if she found out what I paid for it, so I tossed the bill in the garbage. While she was off shopping, I took my weapon and a bowl of ice cubes and went out to sit on the veranda.

The gray tabby showed up ten minutes later. I held the frame of the slingshot at arm's length in my left hand and put an ice cube in the pocket. I aimed at the wretched cat, who was even then digging a hole among my cabbages, and yanked the pocket back as far as my cheek.

The pain was so bad I nearly fainted and the ice cube fell down the steps at my feet. The arthritis in my elbow was like fire. I sat there cupping my elbow in my left hand, cursing a blue streak, while tears of rage and pain ran down my face. In a few minutes, I pulled myself together and headed toward the kitchen to look for the pain pills. As I stepped in, I glanced toward the carport and, sure enough, there was the cream-colored cat under the wild currant again.

This time the creature was licking its shoulder and ignoring me. That made me madder than when it stared at me. It seemed to be saying there was nothing I could do to stop the invasion, no way I could protect my own property.

Which is what Fenella said when she came home and tore a strip off me for my slingshot caper. "That was a cruel thing to do, Angus McDonald. When I was a girl, my brothers used to kill rats with slingshots."

"Ice cubes aren't going to kill anything."

"No, but they could hurt something fierce. Like your elbow, Angus."

"Ay, I get the message." And I did, too, but I wouldn't have minded a bit if that cat was hurting as much as me.

When the pain pills took effect, I drove to my favorite garden shop and bought a few things. At home again, I dug up a little earth beside the fence just behind the carport and planted some seeds. Fenella found the empty packet on the veranda railing an hour later.

"Catnip?" she said. "You planted catnip?"

"Ay, I'm beaten. I'm trying to placate the beasts. Maybe if I give them something to get drunk on, they'll leave the rest of the yard alone." With luck, she'd never find out about the rest of my plan.

During the next few weeks, while the catnip grew, I was a gentler, kinder man. I no longer chased the cats, just shooed them away. I no longer shouted, just spoke in a quiet way. I weeded and hoed and harvested and mostly held my tongue, though it nearly killed me to do it. One morning I stepped out on the veranda with my mug of tea and saw the cream-colored cat sniffing the new catnip plants.

When Fenella went shopping after lunch, I hurried out and spread slug bait in the cat garden, hoping the cream-colored cat would spread the word about the catnip. If the creatures poisoned

themselves with slug bait, I'd have won the battle of keeping my property to myself.

A little later, I sat on the veranda with a cup of tea and watched the cream-colored cat mince daintily over to the catnip garden. As it sniffed at the fresh green plants, I murmured, "Eat hearty! Make my day."

The cat turned its back on the catnip, glanced at the porch to see if I was watching, raised its tail and sprayed.



## WASTING TIME

An old road climbs partway up the mountain. It's mostly grassed over now, with clumps of broom sprouting in the middle and blackberry vines snaking out from the ditches, but people still drive up there once in a while. They probably want to know where it goes, like I did the first time I saw it. There's not much to see, though. The road ends in a little clearing thick with young green alders, blazing yellow broom, and the tire tracks where cars have turned around. Sometimes, I wonder who built that road and why, but I never bothered trying to find out because it's going back to forest now, and that's fine.

When I first went up there, I saw a whiskey jack perched on a cedar branch at the edge of the clearing, preening his gray feathers. He said, 'Wesakechak' to me and a few other things, too. I apologized for being in his space and never went back since. I wonder does he play tricks on people who park there? Maybe he drops pine or fir cones on car roofs. He means humans no harm, but he's entitled to his territory, and I know he likes his little jokes. Now and then, Wesakechak glides down out of the sky into my clearing and sits on the garden fence while we have a little talk.

Up until the time I'm going to tell you about, no human knew where I lived, which is how I wanted it. On my way home, carrying a pack of food on my back, I'd walk up that old road, veer off into the forest, and make my way through the trees until I reached the cabin. I hardly ever went the same way twice, so I never made a path anybody could follow. Well, a dog would track me easy enough, but people don't let dogs off the leash on this mountain, because of the bears.

In ten years, I only ever saw one bear and, when he saw me, he turned around and ran. Bears move really fast. But whenever I went down to the general store and service station at the crossroads, I often dropped a remark about seeing bears. The less reason for people to come up my mountain, the better it suits me. I figure Wesakachak likes his privacy, too, and I know the bear does.

Sometimes in summer, I walk down to the store barefoot. I'm never in a hurry, so when I'm putting a foot down and feel a twig or a pebble coming up to meet it, I just put that foot down a little to one side and no harm done. Parts of the forest are open, letting in the sun, and I like those best because there's some grass and it's softer underfoot. Ferns are okay, too, though I try not to trample them because they're good to eat.

In those open patches of forest, I can see blue sky and a snow-covered peak a couple of mountains away. That peak reminds me there's more wild country around, someplace I can go if I need to.

On this particular July day, I was walking through the trees, headed for the store, when I felt a quick sharp prick on my arm. It had to be a mosquito and I slapped it hard. When my arm quit hurting, I looked at the mess I'd made of the insect and felt a second's worth of regret. I could have given it a little blood; I had so much. On the other hand, did it have to be so rough when it cozied up to the trough? My regret vanished. All animals kill for food, but sometimes the food fights back and wins.

It's just the way things are.

But it was a fine, sunny day with no wind, and the scent of cedars, and wild currant, and stinging nettles, and a thousand other green lives eddied around my nose, making me happy. I hit the old road after a while, where the walking was easier and the sun hotter, so I rolled up my shirt sleeves again and speeded up a trifle.

When I came down around the last curve before the crossroads, I heard a big motor changing gears, and then I smelled it. A cloud of dust and diesel smoke boiled up around the rear end of a silver bus as it disappeared down the road, heading east. Bert, the storekeeper, would be unpacking boxes and sorting mail when I got there.

If my check had come, I could pay him what I owed and there'd be something left over for a little piece of nostalgia. Like a chocolate bar, maybe. Or, since I was right now mostly living off my garden, there might be enough for a new shirt and a couple of paperbacks if he had any new ones.

I walked across the veranda, opened the screen door, and the first thing I saw was a woman and a young boy, maybe ten or so. The woman was young, too, and pretty, with long brown hair. She wore sandals and a cotton dress, low-cut in the front. I could see enough skin that my eyes kept wanting to stare at it, but I was too embarrassed to do that, so I focused on Bert. He didn't look happy.

"Finn," Bert said, "how are you?" He never waited for an answer; it was just his way of saying hello. "You got some mail. You can take it from the slot your own self."

There was only one envelope, like I expected, from the government. Nobody else knows how to find me, which is what I had in mind when I came here, but the government owes me for the time I put in. I use that money for grub, and boots, and once in a while, a new axe head, and feel no guilt. I live on government land, too, but I don't do it no damage. When I die, the cabin will just decay back into the land, with the bugs having a field day chewing on old wood.

When I turned around, the woman and boy were headed out the door, each carrying a little plastic bucket. "They friends of yours?" I asked Bert.

He shook his head no. "Never seen 'em before. They got off the bus and come in here looking for a drink of water." Bert shook his head again. "Now you know I don't carry bottled water; that's a rip-off if ever I seen one. Water to drink should be free, like air. So I sent them round behind to the well."

"So how come they didn't get back on the bus?"

Bert rolled his eyes. "They missed it. I don't know what they was doing, maybe figuring out how to work the pump handle. And that driver is the worst bugger on the route, short-tempered as a wolf with one foot in a trap."

I could see now why he was unhappy. There's only one bus a day along the road and today's was gone. "What're they going to do?"

Bert scowled. "Don't know. I asked were they hungry and the boy said yes, so I sent them out to pick raspberries. There's a bunch of wild ones up the hill behind here." Bert paused, while he glanced around the store. "I'll give 'em a loaf of bread and slice some cheese. But where in hell are they gonna sleep?"

I didn't have an answer for that one. There's a couple farms down in the valley, but a long way to walk and owned by people I wouldn't beg a glass of water from, never mind a bed. In the other direction, about ten miles or so, there were a few houses for miners working the mountain east of mine. Bert didn't have any room; his tiny trailer was only big enough for a cot, a closet, and a hot plate.

"You got any sleeping bags?" I asked. "I guess they can use the floor."

Bert shook his head again. He was pretty good at that. "No, I don't. And anyway, I don't want them sleeping in the store. They could steal me blind."

It wouldn't kill Bert to lose what they could carry, maybe a couple cans of beans and some candy, or jeans for the kid. I didn't think he kept anything of real value in the store, though

maybe he had a fortune buried under the floorboards. Then again, most likely not. I figured he was like me, uneasy having people around where they weren't supposed to be.

The next thing he said shook me. "Whyn't you take 'em to your place, Finn?"

I was so surprised at this idea, I couldn't think what to say for a minute. When I got my mouth closed again, I knew there was only one answer. "No way! That cabin is my territory, and I don't want people nosing around in it."

"It would be the neighborly thing to do."

"Being neighborly is fine when there's a need. But I don't see why I should look after people too stupid to catch a bus."

"You're a hard man, Finn."

"Well, I don't know about that. Everybody's got a right to privacy. If you don't want them in the store, they could sleep on the porch, on those old Muskoka chairs you got out there."

"Between the mosquitoes and the slivers, I doubt they'd get much sleep."

"Better than the ground." I turned to look at the front of the store, where Bert kept a rack of paperbacks. "You got any new books?"

It was my lucky day. I found two books that looked pretty good and, when I paid for them and paid off my account, I still had a nice credit. So I bought a pack of cigarettes.

I don't smoke inside, ever, so it's just a good weather once-in-a-while thing. I enjoy the smell of cigarette smoke, same as the smell of wood burning in a fireplace. So, I'll have one, sitting on my little veranda, or leaning on the garden fence and, while the smell is nice, by the time I'm done, it tastes pretty rough. Then I have to go eat something to take the taste off my tongue, but for a day or two I appreciate good, clean air even more than usual. It might be weeks before I smoke another one.

I looked around Bert's store, like I always did, enjoying the odd whiff of apples, leather, or onions, and wondering, like always, what he'd do with the odd bits and pieces that never sold. I was just about to head out when the woman and boy came back in. The boy's face was stained with raspberry juice and his bucket was empty, but the woman handed her full bucket to Bert.

"Thought you might like these for yourself," she said.

"Thanks," Bert said. He was scowling again, but I figured that was just a way of covering up the fact he was worried about this pair.

The boy held out his hand to me. "Your name's Finn, right? Mine's Jake."

I shook hands with him, of course. I hadn't seen many young ones with manners that good. The next thing, the woman held out her hand, too.

"I'm Sally," she said, with a smile that showed even teeth, and a dimple on either side of her mouth.

"Hi!" I let her hand go then, not knowing what else to say. I like female people just fine, but I've never had much to do with them. If there was going to be a conversation, she'd have to start it. And there wasn't much point because I was leaving.

It was Jake who started the conversation. "Mister Bert says you live up in the hills all by yourself. Is that right?"

I nodded.

Jake's eyes were sparkling. "Yeah? Really? Man, that is so cool! No people there?"

"That's right," I said. "No people, no TV, no roads. Just me and my garden and the animals that visit." I was surprised that he seemed to like the idea. Far as I knew, most kids couldn't stand to live without electronic gadgets and constant stimulation.

"That's how I want to live," Jake said. "Plants are way more interesting than people. When I



grow up, I want to be one of those guys studies plants."

"Botanist," his mother said. "But, if that's what you want to be, you'll have to put up with people and cities until you get through college."

"Yeah, I guess." Jake looked downcast. Then he looked up at me, his face eager again.

"Could you show us where you live so I can see what it's like? Then I can think about it when I have to go to school, and stuff."

"Well, why don't you and your mother come and stay at my place till you have to catch your bus tomorrow?"

I couldn't believe I'd said that. I stood there, feeling short of breath, and trying to suck those words back inside my mouth. But that kid got to me. You know?

"We don't want to impose," Sally said.

"Oh, Mom! Can we, please, can we?" Jakes was almost bouncing up and down in his eagerness.

There was my chance to suck those words back. But I couldn't.

"You won't be a bother," I said. "I built my bunk the size of a double bed, 'cause I like to spread out when I sleep. So you and Jake can have that, and I'll sleep in my easy chair."

There was more back and forth, with Bert looking happy again, and insisting I take another dozen eggs and some bread, on him. We added those to my pack, I shrugged into it, and led the way out of the store and up the road. I felt...oh, I don't know...stupid, I guess. I'd let myself in for something I always swore I'd never do.

Jake and his mother had no problem talking. Mostly asking questions. They wanted to know my last name, and where I was from, and why I lived here in the back of beyond. After about the third time that I told them all that stuff was in the past, which didn't matter any more, because the only thing that mattered was right now, they quit.

Then Jake started asking me about the plants along the road and on the path I took through the forest, and I could talk about those things easy. I'd studied them in books once upon a time and now I was doing it every day in real life.

When we came out of the trees into the small clearing that held my cabin, workshop and garden, Jake stopped dead still and stared. His face was something to behold. It was like he wanted to put his arms around the whole place and keep it, or eat it up like a big hunk of chocolate cake. That was then I quit worrying about inviting them to stay. Finally, a quiet little "wow!" came out of his mouth.

"This what you have in mind for yourself?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Jake's eyes shone. "Why have you got that big fence around the garden?"

I told him about deer eating potato tops, as well as the rest of my vegetables. Then he wanted to know about the outhouse and what I did with stuff that couldn't be flushed away into a sewer, like wash water and left-over coffee. I explained how I built the cabin by myself, mostly from fallen trees in the forest, and took him into the workshop to show him my tools, the ones I'd bought and the ones I'd made.

His mother followed along, not saying anything to discourage the kid, which surprised me. Not a word out of her about him being a doctor or lawyer or somebody working in an office and having clean hands. Once in a while she'd ask a question that told me she'd lived in a city her whole life.

The sun was disappearing behind the trees when Jake said, "What time is dinner? I'm starving!"

"I eat when I'm hungry," I said. "I don't worry about time."

"You don't?" Sally's eyes were wide. "But how do you manage without a routine?"

I noticed she wore a fancy little wristwatch. "I do have a routine. When it's dark, I sleep and when it's light, I work or go exploring."

"But don't you have breakfast at a certain time, and lunch, and dinner?"

"No, like I said, I eat when I'm hungry." It looked like she was having a hard time understanding that, and I didn't know what else to say about it, so I suggested that we get dinner ready right away, since the kid was hungry. Anyway, I was hungry myself.

I took them into the cabin, and Jake got all excited again about the furniture and shelves I'd built and started looking at my books. I asked Sally to set the table for three and felt glad I'd washed my breakfast plate, because I only had the three. Then I took Jake out to the garden, and we picked some salad things and, when we came back, I showed him how I made dressing with olive oil and vinegar.

When we finished the sliced canned ham and salad and ate the apples I'd bought, I said to Jake, "So, do you like it here?"

"I wanna live here!" he said. His face was still glowing.

"Well," said Sally, "if you're lucky and get a botany degree, you might be able to have a place like this when you're doing research. But you have to get through school and college first."

I wondered if she was going to tell him he might want to get married and have a family, which would mean no cabin in the wild woods, but she didn't. I was getting to where I thought she was okay, but I still found it hard to look her in the face. Every time I did, it was like those bulges under her low-cut dress kept pulling my gaze downward.

"When do you have to catch your bus?" I asked.

"Eleven o'clock," Sally said.

"Well, wind your watch tonight," I said, "because you'll have to keep track. I don't have a clock, or a watch."

"No clock?" Jake asked, pulling his face out of one of my plant books. "Don't you ever have to know what time it is?"

"Why would I?"

He thought about that for a minute. "Okay, I guess you don't. You don't have a job to go to, right? And there's no TV. But where we live, there's a schedule for everything. We have to always know what time it is."

I knew what he meant. After all, I'd lived there.

A little sunlight still slanted through the trees, but it was almost dusk. I built a fire in the airtight heater to heat water for washing, and because it gets cool at night up here on the mountain, no matter how hot it gets during the day. After the dishes were done, I lit the kerosene lamp, which I usually use only in winter, but Jake wanted to keep on exploring my books.

"I'm going out to have a cigarette," I said to Sally. Back in the days when I smoked a lot, I did it whenever I was restless, or uncomfortable with something, which seemed like it was most of the time. "You want to join me?" I'd just as soon have gone alone, but she was company and I had to be polite.

"Sure," she said, "but just to talk. I quit smoking when I was pregnant with Jake."

She followed me out to the garden, and we each rested a hand on one of the fence cross-pieces. It was almost dark now, though still light enough to see the path. I looked at the cabin and the warm glow of light shining from the window. Looked downright homey, that did.

Sally said, "I have a suggestion. You and I could share the bunk, and let Jake sleep in the easy chair."

That really shook me. So much that I answered fast, before anything else could happen. "It's nothing personal, but I think it's better you share with Jake."

She smiled. "It's how I make my living, if that makes a difference. I'd like to give you something for putting up with us."

My body was reacting to the pictures in my mind, so I took a long drag of that cigarette, blew the smoke up at the sky, and tried to think of something else. "Thanks just the same, but I live up here to get away from people, not get closer."

"You're being nice to Jake."

"That's different," I said. "Jake's still green. When he's grown up, he might be as ornery and opinionated and entitled as most adults I ever knew." Then I realized what I'd said might sound insulting, and added, "Not including you, of course."

Sally's teeth gleamed in the fading light. "No offence taken. For either the comment or the refusal."

"That's okay then. I sure didn't mean to offend."

We stood there another few minutes until I finished the smoke. Sally talked about the bus trip, which was taking them to visit Jake's grandmother. There wasn't much I could say except I hoped it would turn out good. We went back inside before it got too dark to follow the path, and I put my cigarette butt in the airtight so it would burn up.

I built up the fire a smidge and made cocoa with powdered milk. It took Jake a long time to finish his; he was talking so much he didn't have time to swallow. But finally, his eyelids started to droop. So I sent them to the outhouse with a flashlight, and fixed the bunk nice and neat. When they came back, I was out on the veranda with my sleeping bag, ready to bed down in the big old rocker.

"I thought you were going to sleep in the easy chair," Sally said.

"Well, I was, but I often sleep outside in summer. It gets cool, but the air smells good." There'd likely be mosquitoes whining around, too, but I didn't want to be inside, listening to Sally breathing in the bunk, so close to me. No matter where I parked myself, though, I'd have a tough time sleeping.

So we all said goodnight. I folded the sleeping bag around me, and when the lamp inside went dark, I closed my eyes, not expecting to sleep at all.

But I did.

In fact, I didn't wake until Jake pounded across the veranda on his way to the outhouse. I stood up, startled, and realized the early morning sun was slanting through the trees. I felt real happy I'd slept the whole night away, saving myself the trouble of worrying about people being in my house and in my bed.

When everybody was washed and tidied, I made breakfast; fried eggs and ham, and bread toasted over the fire in the heater. Jake did that. He thought holding the toasting frame with bread in it over hot flames was just the neatest thing to do. He wanted to know where I'd got the toasting frame, and when I said I'd made it from heavy wire, he looked at me like I could do magic.

When we'd done eating, Sally insisted on washing the dishes and after that, I made some coffee. We sat on the veranda and watched the morning heat up, until Sally said they'd better get back down to the store. She didn't want to miss the bus again.

"Couldn't we stay just a little longer?" Jake was drawing lines in the dirt with the toe of his runner.

"I promised your grandma we'd spend a week with her," Sally said. "And you know she'll

spoil you rotten, which you always like."

"Yeah." Jake looked down at his foot. "Yeah."

I hoped Jake wouldn't ask the question that was lurking in his head, about whether he could come back and visit someday. He was a good kid, but he'd have to be satisfied with the memories he already had of my wild woods and my life here.

A few minutes later we headed into the trees and were soon enough back on the old grassed-over road. Half an hour later, we walked into Bert's store, and he said, "Well! Right on time! The bus is due in about ten minutes."

Sally started thanking me for all I'd done, and I could see Jake was going to ask that question I didn't want to hear. So, I broke in. "Look, you're more than welcome for what little I could give you, and I hope you have a real good trip. I'm going now, because I don't like goodbyes." I grabbed Jake's hand and pumped it, then Sally's. Then I was outta there like a rabbit with a coyote on his tail.

I didn't exactly run up the road, but darn near. I was around the corner when I heard the bus brakes squealing down by the store. I slowed up then, so the sun wouldn't fry me altogether, but I was back home a lot faster than usual. Then I opened the door and all the windows in the cabin, and I washed dishes, and sheets, and by suppertime, the place was mine again. I had a cigarette later, which I figured I'd earned, and it tasted good in the sweet silence of dusk. Didn't even need to take the taste away this time.

A week went by before I went down to the store for supplies. Just to be sure the story was done, I said to Bert, "Did the woman and her boy get on the bus okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "But before they left, they bought you a present." He went behind the counter, reached down underneath it, and handed me a brown paper sack.

So the story wasn't over.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Promised I wouldn't say," Bert replied.

I hadn't wanted a present. Didn't need one.

Well, I'd dealt with worse problems than that. I bought more eggs, and some good cheddar, cut from the wheel on the counter, and loaded up my pack with those and the paper sack bundle.

On the road home, I thought about tossing the package into the ditch, getting rid of it that way. But maybe it was something wouldn't rot itself back into the soil. Maybe it was food. I never wasted food. Anything I didn't want to eat, other animals would.

When I got home, the thing bugged me till I had to open it.

It was a clock, an old-fashioned wooden wall clock that I'd seen a hundred times at the store. It wasn't an antique, just something made to look old. There was a hand-written note with it. Jake's awkward scrawl said the clock would keep me company with its ticking and remind me of him. Sally's tidy words said it would remind me to enjoy every minute of every hour.

I don't need reminders about enjoying my days, or company, either. I have lots of company out here in the wild woods.

What to do with the clock was a puzzle. I couldn't take it back to Bert, and I wouldn't keep it in the cabin, or anyplace else I might see it. I hate waste, but sometimes that's all you can do.

The clock went out to the workshop with me, and I took it apart, piece by piece. I broke the wooden case up into kindling and took that into the cabin, where I laid a fire in the heater. The key and the hands were of no use to me, so I put them aside. I was extra careful getting the mainspring out so it wouldn't fire itself at the window and break the glass. But I had no use for it, either, and it went into the discard pile, along with the gears and other bits and pieces.

So, what to do with the discards? Only one thing made sense. I put them into the paper bag, picked up the shovel, and headed out to the old road. I dug a hole, pretty deep, through the gravel and everything, dropped the bag into it, and covered it up. A thousand years from now, maybe, the bacteria will have chewed through the metal.

Wesakechak sat on a pine beside the road and watched me. He didn't have anything to say about what I was doing, so I guess it was all right.

I'd killed that clock, which maybe meant I'd wasted time. And why not?

Someday it would waste me.



## **SPIDER**

Small bathroom spider  
weaves a web in the window,  
netting a world view.

## TRUE SHAPES

Once upon a time, in a land far away, a beautiful princess was born. Her noble parents named her Damara, which means gentle. True to her name, she grew into a sweet young woman who saw only the good in everyone.

Damara's beloved father died in battle when she was seventeen and her mother, heartbroken, soon fell ill. When she knew death was near, she sent the servants from the room and clasped Damara's hands in hers.

"My child, I must burden you with a secret. Promise never to reveal it."

"I promise, Mama," Damara said, her tears dropping softly on the silk coverlet.

"Faery blood runs in your veins, for I am of the Sidhe," her mother whispered.

Damara gasped. The people in her country scorned faeries, believing them to be evil. Anyone suspected of being a faery was driven out or, at the very least, left to wander the hills and high roads, alone and hungry. Sometimes worse things were done.

"Don't be afraid, child," her mother said. "You are under no enchantment and your heart holds its true shape. Your powers will protect you, but guard and use them well."

"What powers do I have, Mama? Who will teach me how to use them?"

"They will arise when you need them."

"But is there no one I can call on? People may drive me from the castle, though it is my home and though I harm no one."

"You must be strong, my daughter, young as you are. I promise your powers will protect you. Know only one thing else: use them to do good in the world. Never for selfish reasons."

"Yes, Mama." Damara's tears flooded her cheeks.

"Remember, you have given your word never to speak of your faery blood or your power. Farewell, my darling daughter." So saying, the mother drew her last breath.

Damara wept for seven days and seven nights, then began to learn the ways of the land and the laws of prudent husbandry. Wherever she went, walking or riding, the young footman, Alastair, followed close behind. He had been trained by her father, and trusted by her mother, and she soon learned to rely on his strong, steadfast presence, which seemed unusual in one so young. Gradually Damara took up her new duties, overseeing her castle and lands with a kind and sympathetic hand. The people loved her, as they had from the time she was a babe in arms.

In spite of her mother's words, she sought to explore her mysterious power late at night, when she was alone. But nothing worked. Her spiders remained spiders, flowers did not bloom at her behest, candles did not burst into flame when she flicked her fingers at them. Perhaps her mother had been wrong; whatever power she might possess seemed too weak to have any merit.

Two years passed and Damara's people prospered. They began to speak of their hope that a prince would come and end her solitude. Damara, too, wished to find happiness in true love. She sent invitations to the nobility in neighboring kingdoms. Alas, her suitors were old men hankering after lost youth or larger empires. She feasted them, pitied them, and sent them away.

One day in late spring, Damara sat on her favorite grassy bank, beside a brook that bubbled down from snow-covered mountains. Alastair waited discreetly in the background. She glanced at him to make sure that he was too far away to intrude on her thoughts and noticed, for the first time, that he had become handsome as well as tall. An acceptable quality for a prince, but of course, he was only a commoner. And, handsome he might be, but he seemed dull, never speaking unless she spoke first.

Sunlight filtered through the leaves and crowned her golden head as she bent over the white daisy in her hand. She gently pulled the petals away, one by one, reciting, "He loves me, he loves me not." The last petal was "he loves me." Sighing, she dropped the stem at her feet. Why ask about love when there was no one to give it?

Damara picked more daisies and wove a chain with them. She placed it around her head, raised her hand and murmured aloud, "Let my prince come to me!"

"Lady, he is here."

Startled, she glanced around but could see no one in the glade.

"Here, my lady. Look near your feet and you will see the sad state of a young man who was a prince but chanced to anger a wicked witch."

A small green frog crouched beside the brook. He looked up at her with large, sad eyes and said, "My lady, the witch decreed that I may be saved from this dire enchantment only by the kiss of a lovely princess."

Damara gazed at the frog in amazement. She had heard tales of such things but never dreamed they could be true.

"Do you have a name, frog?"

"No, my lady. The witch took it when she took away my true shape."

"Then I shall name you Calder because you come from a cold brook." She held out her hand and the frog leapt onto it. His skin felt cold, but his eyes, a mixture of brown and green, were soft and pleading.

Could this frog truly be her prince? Had she woven some magic spell with the white-petaled daisies? Or was the power contained in her raised hand and her wish? Damara stared at the small, ugly creature sitting on her palm. Should she risk a kiss only to have her hopes dashed again? Or put him back in the brook?

"My lady..." Alastair had moved closer and now stood only a few feet away, his face pale, his expression concerned.

"It's all right, Alastair. I am perfectly safe. You may take up your position again." She could not tell him that she was protected by faery powers.

And she could not turn Calder away, lonely and unloved as he was.

She bent and kissed the frog on the top of his head. To her amazement, he blossomed into a tall, young prince with hair of ebony, skin of ivory and eyes of summer blue. He held out his hand and raised her to her feet. "My lady, if you will take me as husband, I will love and honor you as long as I live."

A month later, Damara and Calder were wed under an arch of white rosebuds in the castle courtyard. The people feasted and danced for seven days. And for seventy and seven days, the prince and princess rode matching white horses the length and breadth of the country. Damara took great pleasure in acquainting her prince with the people, the fertile fields, and thick woods. Everyone was charmed by Calder and delighted for her, but none were as happy as she.

One day, as they rode, Calder rose in the stirrups and cried, "I must see at once what is over that next hill!" He loosed the reins of his steed and galloped ahead.

When Damara caught up with him, he said, "Why so laggard, lady? Is not the day fair? Are not the horses on their mettle?"

"In a race, I urge my horse to run," she said. "But when I look at the land, I want to see every leaf on the trees, each bird in flight, each head of grain nodding on its stalk."

The prince lifted her hand and kissed it. "Sweet Damara! But surely I am entitled to ride as fast as I choose."



"Of course," she said, though she was better pleased when he matched his pace to hers. Then she remembered how sad he had looked in the shape of a frog and put away her selfish thoughts. He had his true shape now and it was a delight to see how his eyes, so like a summer sky, danced with merriment and sparkled with happiness.

On the seventy-eighth day, the prince begged leave to remain at home and Damara rode out, with Alastair at her heels, to oversee the corn harvest. She returned to find servants making up the huge canopied bed in which her parents had slept. Calder stood in the middle of the room, caressing his chin with his fingers.

"Ah, there you are, my lady! I have decided that we should take this room as our own; it is the largest sleeping chamber in the castle."

"But," Damara said, "the chamber we have is a fine one, with ample light."

Calder frowned. "I am your husband and your prince. I am entitled to sleep where I choose and certainly I am entitled to the largest chamber."

"Of course, my dear," she said, remembering his former sadness. Surely, she had done much good by releasing him from his cruel enchantment.

She watched with tears in her eyes as the servants, supervised by Alastair, with a face as expressionless as a mask, carried away her parents' clothing. No longer could she sit in this room among their things and remember the happy days she had spent with them.

Damara blinked away her tears and managed a smile for her charming prince and his eyes of summer blue. If she confessed how much she missed her father and mother, he would surely agree to keeping their bedchamber as a shrine. But it seemed more generous to brighten his heart by letting him sleep in the chamber he deemed so fitting.

Her sleep was restless that night, her dreams muddled. But life continued its pleasant journey uninterrupted for several weeks, bringing happier dreams. Calder was particularly loving on the turning of the autumn equinox and gave her gold rings for her fingers. Though she was pleased, she chided him for extravagance.

He kissed her on the cheek. "My sweet, are you not the ruler of this realm? Then surely you are entitled to wear the loveliest baubles I can find for you."

"I am sorry to scold, my love," she said. "The money you paid for these pretty golden rings should have gone to repair farmers' houses. Now they will have to wait until after harvest."

"If I had known that, I would never have bought the rings," he said. "But it is done, and I am sure that the farmers, fond of you as they are, will not mind waiting. After all, they have the harvest to think about, and their pints of an evening."

"I am remiss," Damara said. "We have been wed for several months and you have ridden over every acre of our land. I should long ago have invited you to share the responsibilities of administration with me." Perhaps it was time, too, to confide her secret to the prince, who loved her so well. Her lips parted, but her tongue refused to obey. Her mind echoed, over and over again, her mother's words, 'I forbid you to speak.'

Calder smiled. "On the contrary. I am not ready to step into your shoes. I should like another few months to learn the land and the people who work it."

The next day a carriage stopped at the castle gates and debouched an old woman with dyed red hair and fourteen trunks.

"My mother, Alcina," Calder said. "She has come to live with us."

"Here? But..."

Calder looked at Damara reproachfully. "She is my mother; I owe her my life. Surely I am entitled to have my only living relative by my side?"

Damara's thoughts seemed caught in a net of cobwebs. But there could be no harm in Calder's mother, who would naturally wish to be close to her son.

She went out and cordially welcomed the old woman, then brought her into the castle and led her to a large bedchamber with a small reception room attached. The rooms had a southern view and both Calder and Alcina seemed content with the arrangement.

Over the following weeks, however, Damara learned that Alcina had a tongue which wagged at both ends and spewed unpleasant opinions that Damara had never imagined could exist. In order to avoid the old woman's criticisms and litany of woes, she rode out early each day, with Alastair riding close behind, to supervise the workers. She often stayed to watch the ripe crops reaped and stored and to listen to the chatter of squirrels putting nuts by for the winter.

A stray thought flew into her mind one day and settled there. It was the people who farmed the land who were the true royalty, not herself, who was merely born to a meaningless title. Mulling over this new idea and suffused with the warmth and joy of a golden autumn, she could believe with all her heart that Alcina did not mean to be unkind or critical. She admired Calder, too, for the unselfish patience he showed by spending most days keeping Alcina company.

One day she came home to find Calder in the library, bent over heaps of parchment maps. When she asked what he was studying, he smiled and said, "Don't worry your pretty little head about it, my sweet. I am plotting a surprise, which I trust will provide endless delight for you." Her fears allayed, she went off to the kitchens to discuss the following day's menu with the head cook, though she could not help wondering how much Calder planned to spend on the surprise.

The first winter flurry of snow had come and gone when Damara, on her white mare, clattered across the moat early one afternoon, Alastair at his usual post behind her. She saw Calder with maps under his arm, leaning against the battlements on the roof of the keep. She handed the reins to Alastair and hurried up the worn stone steps to the roof. Was Calder about to reveal his surprise? She could barely contain her curiosity.

"My lady, I am glad you are come. I have spent much time studying our lands and it is time to tell you of the improvements I have planned."

"What might those be?" The quick beating of her heart seemed to warn of danger. What possible improvements could be made to lands already rich and beautiful?

Calder waved his arm to encompass the rolling fields, hills and forests, horizon to horizon. "This land feeds us well with barley and corn, my sweet, but barley and corn may be had anywhere. I intend to cut down the trees and level the ground for jousting. Many knights live for sport, and they will pay well for such an amenity. More than that, we will grow rich from rents for the seats and huts we erect for those who joust and those who watch." He raised her chin with one finger so that he could smile into her eyes. "I will buy golden rings for every one of your lovely toes."

Damara's heart constricted with pain. "My love, I know you have only my happiness at heart, but I cannot give my consent to such a plan. This kingdom is my birthright and my heritage, but also mine to care for. In fairness to the land and those who live on it and by it, such a thing must never happen."

Calder's smile vanished and he looked at her coldly. "Your heritage? I know about your heritage, madam. You are naught but a faery, full of foolishness and mischief."

Her blood quieted, became like ice. "Who told you such a thing?"

"It came from your own lips, my sweetling, as you slept." Calder sneered. "I will shout it to the world if I must. I am your prince; I am entitled to your obedience."

For the very first time, her mind spat lightning. She remembered her mother's words, 'use

your powers only to do good.' And she had failed. She had raised up this ungrateful prince for her own pleasure. Worse, because of that foolishness, her powers might be forfeit.

Her tongue loosened. "Indeed, you are entitled, too, to all the air your lungs can take in." She waved her arm to describe the broad arc of the sky. "Pray breathe deep of it!"

Calder gave her a mocking smile. Then the smile turned to a look of surprise as air filled his body, and finally to one of horror as his body inflated into a balloon which floated up from the roof of the keep, becoming larger and larger.

Damara stood amazed, her hands over her mouth. Here was magic after all, come when it was least deserved, but most needed.

A light breeze wafted Calder toward the flagpole. The tip caught him in the chest, and there came a sound like the popping of a champagne cork. As the air rushed from his body, he plunged toward the greensward of the inner bailey.

Damara hurtled down the stone steps. Though he had betrayed her trust, she could not bear it if he were hurt. At the foot of the steps, she lifted her skirts and ran across the grass.

But Calder's body was nowhere to be seen. Alcina was kneeling, her hands clutched to her breast. Damara opened her mouth to speak, stopping only when she saw the searing hatred in the woman's eyes.

"You murdered my son! You ruined our plans. I shall destroy your crops, destroy your lands, destroy all you hold dear." Alcina rose and strode toward Damara. "And you yourself shall live the rest of your miserable life as a mongrel dog, begging for scraps." Alcina raised her hand. In it was a witch's wand.

Instinctively, Damara raised her own hand, and the words came without thought. "Take your true shape."

The witch's wand vanished and Alcina shrank. In a few seconds a small green frog squatted where she had been standing. The hatred in its eyes was as easy to read as it had been in those of the woman.

"Leave my lands for all time," Damara ordered. "And never again will you take human shape."

The frog shuddered and gasped, but finally turned and hopped toward the moat. On the far side, it stopped and looked back, but Damara raised her hand and the frog fled down the road.

Damara turned her gaze to the grass, searching for Calder. But, where he had fallen, where Alcina had knelt, lay the body of a green frog. Its jaw sagged, the eyes were open and crossed, the summer blue faded to muddy green. In death, her prince had returned to his true shape.

"My lady." Alastair stood close by. "Shall I have the prince's body removed?"

She looked at her footman and her vision cleared. Here was her real prince, one whose true shape remained as steadfast as the land from which he came.

"Yes, Alastair. Then attend me in the drawing room." For a moment she felt breathless and faint, and put her hand on his arm to steady herself. "We have much to say to one another."

The look in his eyes revealed far more than she could have dreamed possible. "I will do as you wish, with all my heart, my lady."



## ATHENA'S OWL

My brother drove me to the bus station. He didn't say much until we parked. Then the words burst out of his mouth like he'd been holding them in for a long time.

"Why isn't Barry going with you?"

"I didn't ask him."

"Why not? It would be a perfect honeymoon trip!"

"I'm not sure I want to marry him."

Jake's knuckles tightened on the steering wheel. "What's the big fucking problem? The guy's crazy about you. He's got money and he'll make more. He's got a house with a view. What the hell do you want, anyway?"

I didn't know. That's why I was going away, to see if I could find out. But I couldn't say that to Jake. My brother was a great guy, but he had no imagination, and so conventional that he could have fit into a cube-shaped box with no spaces left over anywhere. He always knew exactly what he wanted, and he thought anyone who didn't was lacking in the brain department.

I got out, opened the trunk, and hefted my backpack.

Jake slammed his door. "Is that all you're taking for six weeks?"

I'd decided to travel light. With the pack on my back and the bag on my shoulder, both hands would be free to do anything I needed to do.

"I've got this shoulder bag, too." I put the strap over my head and snugged the fat leather bag against me. It held my passport, tickets, money, notebook, and camera. It would go with me wherever I went.

"I assume you've got your cell in there."

"No, I don't. I'm on vacation, Jake. I don't need the office phoning me every five minutes."

He glared at me. "What if you get into trouble? How are you going to get help?"

"I'll worry about that if it happens."

"Six weeks," Jake said, shaking his head. "And how many countries?"

"One," I snapped. "One's enough."

"You're nuts. Weird. Stupid. Anybody with brains would take a phone with them. And anybody else going to Europe would see all of it."

Well, all the airports, anyway.

But he waited while the bus driver stowed my pack in the luggage compartment and, when I was on the first step, he put his hands on my shoulders and kissed my cheek. "Be careful," he said, "and come back safe."

"Try and stop me."

I watched through the bus window as he walked to his car, not looking back. Suddenly I was scared. What if the plane crashed? I wasn't ready to die. And it was only late April; I hadn't had summer yet.

There was no excitement, either. I was facing six weeks away from all my security blankets, my business, my friends, my apartment, my books. Well, yeah, my brother, too. The whole trip seemed like a fantasy, as if my normal every-day life was the only reality. For a minute, I considered getting off the bus and taking a taxi home. But that was ridiculous. I wanted to get away for a while, escape from the pressure Barry had started putting on me. I wanted to be free, and on my own. I wanted an adventure. If I was going to marry him, it might be my last one.

The bus made it to Vancouver airport without crashing. Now I only had to worry about the

plane. I wandered around the terminal, checking out the shops, looking at piles of tees and glossy in-your-face bestselling books. I still felt like I was in somebody else's dream. Every five minutes, I considered turning around and going home.

Then it was time to check in and, once I was through security, little thrills scooted up my spine and the excitement started to build. I was taking the red-eye to Toronto and transferring to another flight there. When the plane was in the air, heading east, and the twinkling lights of Vancouver fell away behind us, my body finally relaxed. But my mind was seething.

Barry popped back into my mind. My secret name for him was The Handsome Anachronism. Very unfair, except that he really was good-looking. He had all the advantages my brother had listed and many more. He couldn't help it if he operated in white-picket-fence mode, wanting all the modern conveniences in his house-with-a-view, as well as two and a half children, and barbecued ribs every Sunday.

As the moon shone on the white-tipped Rockies below, I wondered if he was annoyed with me. He had probably expected an invitation to join me, though he was too polite to suggest it. When that didn't happen, I was sure he expected me to bid him a fond, clinging farewell. But I'd been too eager to escape, to get someplace where I could think without interruption.

Yesterday, I'd had lunch with Rick, one of my clients. The fact that I'd been dating Barry for a year hadn't stopped him pursuing me. Not that he ever admitted that's what he was doing, and I finally decided that he was trying to figure out how to get me into bed without actually asking. Was his ego so tender that he couldn't bear to be refused? Anyway, I didn't understand why he was bothering, since everyone in town assumed that Barry and I were going to get married. Maybe he thought I'd be up for one last fling. But only if it was my idea, so that he wouldn't have to feel guilty.

The thought of "one last fling" was scary.

I turned the overhead light off and told myself to look ahead, not back. For the next six weeks I didn't have to give a damn about anybody but me. Jake, Barry, and Rick would just have to deal with their expectations any way they could.



Late the following afternoon, I began to think I might be trapped in the Amsterdam airport forever. It was always impossible to sleep on airplanes, and I was tired, haggard, and cross. The plane refused to take off and nobody would tell me why. The ultra-modern, orange, curved plastic seats in the waiting room were also impossible for sleeping, and I paced back and forth, gazing out the windows at flat green fields and distant, grazing cows. The deepest thought I could dredge out of my brain was how to find someplace where I could lie down and die.

When the plane finally headed south, it seemed no time before we landed in Athens. I was so tired I hurt, but the excited laughter of Greeks coming home was infectious and I couldn't help smiling. I even lucked into getting a taxi all to myself.

The Phaedra Hotel was situated in an old part of Athens that the clerk said was called the Plaka. I dragged myself up three flights of marble stairs to my room, dropped the pack and bag on the floor, and myself onto the bed. Twelve hours later, I woke up, still feeling stunned but with a growing interest in food.

A few doors away from the Phaedra, I found a tiny combination bakery, cafe, and bar, where I ordered fried eggs and toast. The combination owner, cook, and waiter was a short man with a big moustache and non-stop energy. He cooked and waited tables, babbling the whole time, as

well as kissing and patting and chuckling. When I paid the bill, he gave me a peck on the cheek and told me his name was Jannie.

Feeling as if I might live after all, I wandered off to begin my adventure and, naturally, the first interesting thing I found was a souvenir store. A little bit like an old-fashioned general store, it seemed to have everything, from postcards to Metaxa brandy, from sun hats to jewelry, from lemons to small musical instruments. I rarely wore jewelry, for it always seemed to get in my way, needing to be taken off for this, then put back on for that. But my gaze lit on a silver ring that I liked at once. It looked like a signet ring but, where initials would have been engraved, was the face of an owl with large round eyes that seemed to watch me.

The woman behind the counter told me that the owl was a significant symbol here, a symbol of Athena, who herself was the goddess of wisdom and learning. Not only that, but it represented the ancient Greek aphorism, "Know thyself."

She went on to tell me that Thales, a Greek philosopher who lived about 600 BCE, said that knowing oneself was the most difficult task. When asked what was easiest, he replied, "To give advice."

That wasn't news to me. My brother was always full of advice. So was Barry.

Now that I knew what the owl meant, I had to buy the ring. Finding out what I wanted to do with my life was my prime quest. It fit my ring finger perfectly, so I wore it as I wandered on. It made me smile a little. Had I thus married wisdom? My brother would have said that was the only thing that could save me from my stupidity, and perhaps he was right. But he was home, leading his comfortable, boring life and I was here in a strange country, not knowing much about anything, but willing to learn.

By mid-afternoon, I was ready to catch up on the rest of my missing sleep. To encourage a nap, I drank an Amstel beer under the shade of a tree in a small park. By the time the bottle was empty, I had decided to leave Athens, to go someplace quiet. There were many things to see in the city, but they all seemed to be nagging for attention, like my responsibilities at home, like the decision I hadn't made yet. I didn't want to be nagged. I simply wanted to drift for a little while and see if any wisdom managed to penetrate my brain.

Next day I took the bus, then the ferry, to Corfu. Along the way, I feasted my eyes on silvery olive groves, donkeys with slim, delicate legs carrying amazing loads, red geraniums, and fields of red poppies nodding their heads under the sun. Finding a hotel room turned out to be easy; apparently the tourist season was only just beginning.

In the morning, I crawled out of a damp bed, and saw heavy rain pouring down outside. My friends would be imagining me on a sandy beach, with a drink in my hand, all very sunny and exotic and romantic. They probably wouldn't believe that I was sitting in a damp, musty hotel room, sewing the zipper back in my jeans under a dim light. Ironically, while the rain came down hard outside, there was no water in the bathroom.

I'd come here to relax, to look at pretty scenery, to think deep thoughts about love and life and marriage, not to sleep in damp sheets. How was I supposed to think clearly and make mature decisions when I had to keep coping with lack of sleep or lack of sun? Maybe I should have gone to a Zen retreat. But I didn't want to meditate on marriage for a whole six weeks.

I quit muttering about the backwards supply of water and went down the street to a small cafe for breakfast. This meal, like most others I was to have in Greece, turned out to be a no-frills experience. I got a knife and fork, a napkin, and a basket of bread. I learned that I was expected to order everything all at once, because the waiter never came to ask if I wanted anything else. On the other hand, he took my plate away promptly, and didn't bring the bill until I asked for it.

After breakfast, the sun came out and I wandered around the town. What looked like a pile of lumber grabbed my attention. It reminded me of fresh-cut cedar at home, and I went over for a sniff. But the color was odd and, when I touched a board, I found that it wasn't lumber, but marble, in many different widths, lengths, and thicknesses, and extremely heavy. I badly wanted to steal a chunk, because it would be the perfect souvenir of my trip. But I couldn't find a piece small enough to put in my pocket.

The beach was my next goal, but there'd been an oil spill. I could smell it, and some stuck to the bottom of my runners. Then I noticed droplets of oil everywhere, the rocks splattered with it.

To hell with Corfu, I thought. Time to move on, find a beach where I could relax. When I checked out, the lady at the hotel asked, "You travel all by yourself?"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "You must be lonesome. Whatever you do is better when you do it with someone else."

I thought about that while I sat on the ferry bound for mainland Greece and watched the waves go by. I'd always assumed I would marry, because that's what people did, but so far, I hadn't had any strong urges in that direction, so obviously I hadn't fallen in love. It was difficult, anyway, to know what love was. I liked Barry, and respected him, and I liked sleeping with him, too. Was that love?

On the ferry, I noticed Greek men walking arm in arm, or one would have his arm around the other's shoulder. When they shook hands, they gripped arms. One boy dozed with his head and shoulders in the lap of another. They seemed to show affection and touch each other unhesitatingly. But I had not seen men treating women like that. Could romantic, ancient Greece teach me anything about love?

I stayed in a hotel that night and spent part of the morning wandering the streets. Athena's owls were everywhere, on jewelry, tiles, and tees, and I was tempted to buy more. But, surely, one ring was enough to teach me wisdom, if anything inanimate could do that. I wondered if I was learning anything. If so, I couldn't figure out what it was.

I kept on traveling. A rickety, green bus took me across northern Greece to the east coast, and eventually I decided to stay still for a couple of days. I chose what my map said was a small village. I got off there, hoping to walk the beach and give my ears a rest from rattling vehicles and chattering Greeks. I discovered that the map didn't have a clue, because the 'village' consisted of a combination restaurant and grocery store. By the time I decided to keep going, the bus had beaten me to it.

A young man jumped up from his table in the restaurant and said, in barely adequate English, that he would take me to a small hotel on the beach. I thought I might be headed for conflict, but the conversation had been monitored by a dozen people, none of whom made an objection. The man, whose name was George, said the hotel was only a mile away. So I climbed into his small truck, and he delivered me to the hotel, a ramshackle, pink, one-story disaster. He arranged for a room with the owners, who did not speak English, and promised he'd send a taxi in the morning to take me to the bus station.

Once my things were settled in the room, I took my camera outside to a picnic table overlooking the beach. The solitude was glorious and also quiet, except for the lapping water and a few talkative birds. I luxuriated in this for an hour, then went back inside to think, though I knew by now that "thinking" probably meant falling asleep. But, when I got there, George, wearing much nicer clothes, was staring in my open window. I wanted to smack his face but that seemed unfair when he'd done me a favor. I agreed to meet him out front. We had a drink at the

picnic table. He talked; I listened. A very familiar routine.

Then he suggested we walk along the beach. We'd only been walking for five minutes, when an old lady came puffing down the beach. I sat on the sand and talked to her. She talked to George in Greek, and I hoped she was telling him to behave. Soon we turned back toward the hotel. George's suggestions got a little more urgent. He wanted to sit on the beach. I shook my head. Then he wanted to meet me later in the evening and take me for 'restaurant and music.' I thought wistfully of my silent hour at the picnic table and wondered if it would ever happen again.

As we walked, George made an attempt to hold my hand. I'd been collecting pretty pebbles, worn smooth by the sea, and was carrying them in that hand, so I simply dropped all the pebbles into his hand and smiled sweetly. He obviously didn't know what to do. Thus, I got back to the hotel with my hand untouched, my honor intact, and my tongue tired from insisting that I didn't want to go out dancing that night.

To my relief, George did not come back. Nor did he send the promised taxi next morning. When I trudged up the hill to the 'village,' the bus had already come and gone. There would not be another one heading south until the next day. I could not bear to stay in the village and break George's heart again, so I slung on my pack, hoisted my shoulder bag, and started walking. The next village might have a bus. Or it might have a hotel. With luck, it would not have a George.

If I'd known I would have to climb five miles up a steep mountain, I might have risked breaking George's heart again. By the time I was ready to drop, feet burning, shoulders aching, and dripping sweat, a gorgeous old gravel truck stopped and offered me a ride. We went howling and clattering up and down hills with a full load of gravel, while I hung on and smiled over my good luck.

The driver let me off in a small town. The first thing I did was to go into a bar, sit down, lean back, and drink a beer, in spite of the three frowning old men playing cards in the back. I was so thirsty I didn't care that they disapproved of a woman being in a bar. But the expressions on their faces confirmed what I'd already suspected. In Greece, men ruled. Women no doubt had their say, in one way or another, but they said it in the background. I wondered if Barry would become Greek once he'd legally captured me and I was wearing his ring on my finger.

Next morning, I continued on my way south, back toward Athens, and chose a bed and breakfast for my last stop. When I was in the bathroom, I saw, on the shelf above the sink, a metal device which consisted of two clean soup tins joined by a strip of tin approximately four inches long, welded at either end. I couldn't figure out what it was for until, next morning, I saw it attached to the bathtub, each tin covering one water tap, and padlocked in place. I'd had my bath the night before; apparently, I wouldn't be allowed another. I didn't mind. I'd learned that water was very precious in this dry and hilly country. Would Barry have minded? Just one of the things I didn't know about him.

The trip into Athens felt like the height of luxury. The bus was quiet, calm, uncrowded, and cool. The driver used the horn only once. It was even heaven to be back in the Phaedra, in spite of the noise and maniacal taxi drivers in the Plaka. But I stayed only long enough to go to the Lysicratus and drink an ouzo while I listened to a singer accompanied by bouzouki music, and watched acrobats balancing chairs on their heads. I'd planned to do some thinking while I listened and watched, but my mind refused to cooperate. I glanced at my ring for inspiration, but it seemed as though the owl had closed its eyes. A trick of the light, no doubt.





I wandered around Athens for a couple of days, admiring antiquities. The Acropolis kept me busy for hours, gazing at stone carvings and reliving Greek myths in my head. But my eyes were soon full, and I wanted to see the rest of the country, so I went south to Crete, and found a village with a small cove where I could swim and sunbathe. I lazed away a week there, swimming, sleeping, and talking to Tony and Chris, who ran a small open-air cafe on the dock. When I tired of answering their questions and fending off Chris, who kept hinting that perhaps I'd like to live on Crete forever, presumably with him, I climbed aboard another rickety bus, and caught a ferry back to mainland Greece. It was frustrating that I hadn't succeeded in any deep thinking. My owl still had its eyes shut, too.

In a small white rental car, I set off to spend some time on the Peloponnese peninsula. After photographing the Corinth canal, I stopped to roam around the old, open-air Epidaurus theater. I climbed up to the top of its steep tiers of stone seats. A couple of tourists stood below, on the stage itself, pretending to be actors, and their words came up to me, clear and full of emotion, punctuated with self-conscious giggles.

Later, on a narrow, curving mountain road, I had to brake to a stop while a large flock of sheep squeezed past me, herded by two shepherds and half a dozen dogs. I stayed that night at a small hotel perched beside the road, and bought a lambskin rug. "For my husband," I said to the woman behind the counter, trying out the words to see how they sounded. If I married Barry, perhaps I would give him the rug. If not, I'd put it beside my bed, and let my bare feet luxuriate in its wonderful, thick softness.

After another few days on various beaches, I went to Olympia, to see where the games had begun more than twenty-five hundred years before. Barry would have loved seeing the arena and the statuary. But, if we married, we could always come back here.

Finally, I reached Delphi. In Canada, planning my trip, I'd had visions of visiting ruins where I could meditate and write, while sitting on quiet, sunny slopes, perhaps with goat bells tinkling in the background. But there were more tour buses at Delphi than I'd ever seen all in one place, and therefore more tourists, and more tourist guides with their bullhorns, herding their charges up and down steep paths and among ancient fallen marble pillars.

But it was at Delphi where I discovered that the term "Know thyself" had been inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo, according to the ancient Greek writer Pausanias. The brochure explained that the phrase was later the subject of a lecture by Socrates, who taught that the unexamined life was not worth living.

Well, I was examining my life as hard as I could and, even if I didn't get any answers, my life was most certainly worth living.

I came back to Athens for the last four days before my flight home. On the first morning, I went to the National Archeological Museum. The marble statues were stunning and so real that I wanted to touch one, sure it would feel like living flesh. But, of course, no one was allowed to touch these treasures. That reminded me of Barry and the knowledge that I couldn't be sure what marriage was all about until I'd tried it. That was not a happy thought. It seemed a whole lot like buying a lottery ticket.

It was June now, and already hot by mid-morning. The heat was mesmerizing and, by afternoon, I felt as if I couldn't move. I lay on my bed in the Phaedra and read murder mysteries. When I couldn't read anymore, I tried to think about those slippery subjects, love and commitment.

I wanted a man I could have a partnership with, a man who would understand teamwork and

equality. I wasn't sure that Barry understood those words as applied to marriage and I was afraid that if I began talking about these concepts, he'd agree with me, hoping that agreement would break down my defenses. He liked to take care of people and I knew he would happily take care of me. But I didn't want to be taken care of. I wanted us to take care of each other.

I couldn't be sure how marriage would work. Living together for a couple of years would provide an answer, but I knew that would never happen. Barry wanted legal marriage and the social acceptance that went with it. Jake would be on his side. And, if it didn't work, and I found a place of my own again, we'd still be living in the same small town. Not a comfortable prospect.

So, for the next two days, after having eggs and toast at Janni's and getting the usual kiss on the cheek, I lay on the bed, reading or trying to think. I wondered if Barry had missed me. I stared at Athena's owl, perched in solitary splendor on my ring finger, but it still wasn't saying anything. I wondered if 'know thyself' was all it knew how to say.

On the last night, I dined in style at the air-conditioned Dionysus Restaurant, across from the Acropolis. It was set among trees, with a view of the Parthenon and the Theater of Dionysus. The lamb was succulent, barely needing a knife. The service was superb, the waiter at my side with a light before I'd even lifted a cigarette to my mouth. Here, finally, was Greek sophistication, and I enjoyed every moment of its perfection. But I couldn't help thinking that having eggs and toast at Janni's felt somehow more comfortable.

Afterwards, I went to the Lysicratus again and drank Metaxa brandy. A new singer was belting it out, with a voice far less exquisite than the bulge in his tight-fitting white pants. I thought of George and wondered if it was a mark of status for young Greek men to date a tourist. I glanced at my ring, and it finally said something. Young men everywhere wanted to take advantage of women away from home and possibly eager for a fling. Well, if that was the extent of its wisdom, I wouldn't bother asking any more questions.

The next morning, I sweated my way to the airport and flew to Amsterdam. I had no problem boarding the connecting flight and, this time, the plane was eager to fly. I was staring out the window at the corrugated ocean far below, when the woman sitting next to me started a conversation. When she found out I'd been vacationing in Greece, she wanted to know what I liked most about the country.

The answer didn't come easily. Before I'd left home, I thought Greece would be lazy blue sea with waves curling softly over the pebbles, misty mountains, the sun beating down, and marble antiquities everywhere. I hadn't thought about anything else, like the people, the customs, the attitudes. Maybe Jake was right about me being stupid.

When I stumbled over words, she made her question more specific. She really wanted to know about the shopping, the bargains, and if there were decent hotels and restaurants. "I hope they're not so uncivilized as to offer goat meat."

Uncivilized? Greece was where Western civilization had begun!

"They have big juicy lemons and lumpy tomatoes that taste better than any I've ever eaten," I said. "I didn't do any shopping, except for my ring." I held up my hand to show off Athena's owl.

The woman gave me a disappointed look, shrugged, and went back to her magazine.

It was a relief that she'd lost interest. But I was glad she'd asked her question, because now I knew the answer. Or maybe the ring was finally working.

What I'd enjoyed most about Greece was traveling alone, being able to think my own thoughts, whenever I happened to have any, without interruption and, most of all, those rare, precious moments of silence.

I looked at the ring. The owl's eyes were wide open and seemed to be looking right into me.

"Okay," I said, "I get it. No marriage. You, and only you, will be my lifelong companion."  
I'd expected sorrow over something missed, but instead, I felt the lift of freedom.

The plane was sliding down toward the sprawl of Vancouver. I glanced back at the ring, but the owl's eyes seemed closed again.

An owl of few words, obviously. But it used them when necessary.



## ALICE'S GARDEN

The sun floods Alice's garden  
with golden light, with warmth and life,  
mirrored by a thousand saffron petals  
framed in a thousand shades of green.

Dancing yellow daffodils, a gift from that hunk Narcissus, trumpet spring, defy late frost, flirt with warm-hearted jonquils. Tulips wave brilliant cups, spilling radiance everywhere. Tiny, tender, topaz pansy faces peer up through new grass, eager to talk, but the primroses, delicate little honey drops, are too shy to speak.

Now California poppies, with perfect silken skin, flame through the tall grass, looking for July. At their feet, gold coins of lustrous satin called buttercups, tell their story. Long ago, Coyote, playing a game, tossed his eyes up in the air and Eagle snatched them. Coyote made new eyes from the buttercup and that is why he is called Yellow-Eyes.

Tawny curly-headed lusty dandelions, roar look at me, I'll give you wine, green leaves, roots for coffee. Cat's ear, with paws of silk or fur, push up on slender stalks, pretending to be lions, but can do no more than purr. Bold marigolds shout eat me, I'm saffron.

Sunflowers, bold and brassy, heavy-headed, line the weathered cedar back fence, calling the bees and worshipping Helios, gazing up at him all day. Beside them, yellow roses unfold fragrant velvet petals, nod, and whisper of love. Their little echoes, violets sweet as butter, delicate as a butterfly's wing, nestle in heart-shaped leaves.

Tansy, herb of the Benedictine monks, adds to the conversation, offering golden buttons fit for a queen's dress. Brown-eyed Susans shake their blonde tresses and sway to the beat of the breeze. Goldenrod waves frothy plumes. Dahlias shimmer, bedazzle, dance the flamenco. Blazing begonias stand apart, bellowing look at me look at me look at me.

Iris, goddess of the rainbow, waves a royal canary flag above her long green swords. Below, forget-me-nots, small, persistent fifth cousins, peer up with lemon eyes framed in a background of sky.

Beneath the invitation of  
a yellow-painted garden bench,  
a black cat sits, eyes agleam,  
reflecting the amber glow.

## TIME TO GO

Sara Sapphira didn't look like a witch. Most witches are imposing and at least a little scary, with tall black hats and long black cloaks. They ride broomsticks and are followed everywhere by black cats, though several years ago one became famous for having a white Pekinese as a familiar.

Sara was short and rather round, and favored pink cotton dresses, often with darker pink stripes. On cool mornings, she wore a little beige sweater slung over her shoulders and, always, pink or orange runners. She tried to keep her gray hair pulled straight back into a bun, so that she'd look appropriately severe, but it was naturally curly and kept springing out of the bun to curl around her face. Unlike the lean and hollow-jawed witches of story, her cheeks were rosy and plump, just as she was plump in years, though she could never be persuaded to say how much time she had seen go by.

And, to avoid upsetting her neighbors, she rode a pink bicycle rather than the usual broom. This allowed her to sleep in for an extra fifteen minutes and still get to the store on time.

Her emporium looked equally ordinary. The name, *Time to Read*, marched in bold, gold, italic letters neatly across the front window. Below the sign hung a tidy little notice which listed prices for the different categories of books she sold.

Romance—\$5  
Children's—\$10  
Cooking—\$15  
Fiction—\$20  
Reference—\$30  
Oddities—\$45

Customers soon learned that the bookstore was a front for her real business and that the prices on the notice in her window referred to what she charged for time. It was simple, really. Five dollars bought five minutes, ten dollars bought ten, forty-five dollars bought forty-five minutes. Five dollars also bought, of course, a romance novel.

Most people in the little town of Strawberry were delighted when Sara set up shop and especially when they discovered the business behind the business. If they needed a good book to make time fly, or an extra ten or fifteen minutes for something, they simply dropped into Sara's store to get them. It was so thrilling to open the front door and hear the bell that sounded like the ticking of a very large, very hoarse grandfather clock. Then Sara's raven, Spinnaker, who usually perched on top of the old silver-colored cash register, would announce the visitor with a guttural "Reader!" If Sara was on her knees in the very back of the storeroom, unpacking books, he would call "Buttercup!" That was her nickname from when she was young and blonde and hadn't yet become a full-fledged witch.

Sara even took trade-ins if a customer couldn't afford the full price. She would accept anything up to fifteen minutes, provided it hadn't been badly used. Minutes accidentally lost in sleep were perfectly fine, but she refused time which had been carelessly squandered in recriminations. She did not approve of people who wasted time.

The business of selling time, however, had a serious drawback.  
It was illegal.

Sara Sapphira didn't care that she was breaking the law. She wanted to heal people. She wanted to make sure they had time to get over stress, to dream, to live in little fantasies, because

that made them more relaxed and therefore happy. She refused to even say the word 'timelegger,' though she knew that's what she was. When the grandfather clock chimed a new customer, she always looked up in momentary fear that the mayor, Bramley Bumblebutt, would walk in, discover her cache of time, and run her out of town. All her efforts to make Strawberry a happy place would be wasted.

She had made it her business to find out about the mayor because she'd been told that he was a demon for the law. Bramley Bumblebutt was not much taller than Sara, and equally as round. Demons of any kind are usually lean and cadaverous, like normal witches. However, the fact that he didn't look like a demon was offset by the fact that he believed he was the most important person in all of Strawberry, perhaps even the whole world, and thus wore his huge seal of office on a fat gold chain around his neck everywhere he went. The man was almost as proud of his thick brown hair. It fell to his waist and was decorated with gems or braided with delicate silver chains.

When Spinnaker saw the mayor, he croaked, "It's gray! He dyes it."

That happened the first time Bramley entered *Time to Read* and heard, to his surprise, the ticking of a grandfather clock, but without any timepiece in evidence. His sniffer dog, a big Rottweiler named Baby, who went everywhere with him, growled, for he'd never heard such a sound before.

Sara, who'd been in the back, unpacking a new box of books, came to the counter and said, "Can I help you, sir?" She knew at once that this was the mayor, the man who cared more about laws than about people.

Bramley pushed out his chest a little more. "I've come to inspect your bookstore, madam. I am responsible for the welfare of the people of Strawberry, and I must be assured that you're not selling anything illegal."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," Sara said, crossing her fingers behind her back and wondering if she knew enough spells to win a battle against the ogre. She had seen at once that he was an ogre, not a demon. Unfortunately, she hadn't attended a coven meeting for some little while and was thus behind the times on using spells.

"I should hope not," said the mayor. "For example, selling time is illegal. It should be very illegal because people become addicted so quickly."

Sara repressed a giggle. Actions were either illegal or not illegal. There was no such thing as 'very illegal' just as there was no such thing as 'very unique.' But this concern for the language was her personal hobby horse and for the time being, she needed to put him out to pasture.

Her amusement quickly turned to sadness, for the mayor's words reminded her of the time addicts she'd dealt with. Some were so desperate that they literally grabbed the packages out of her hands and swallowed the crystals before they'd even paid. Some were manic and tried to hoard time, which never worked, for the expiration dates were precise. But such people always imagined that Sara would slip up and they'd be able to add to their precious pile of minutes.

Bramley Bumblebutt glanced around the crowded bookshelves. "Mind if I have a look?" he said, and proceeded to begin a close inspection before she'd had a chance to say yes or no. But she wouldn't have dared say no, so it made no difference.

When he'd inspected all the shelves, even removing books to see what might lurk behind them, he said, "Now, madam, I would like to see your storeroom and your workroom, should you have one."

"The storeroom holds only extra copies of books," she said, "and a small table where I do my accounts."

"There's no accounting for witches," Bramley said. "I must insist on an inspection. It's my usual practice. And it's the law." He spoke truly, but he had something else in mind. In his travels about the town, he'd discovered that Sara Sapphira was wildly popular, and he wished to know why. She was merely a witch who sold books, which meant nothing, though she was certainly attractive, he thought, as she preceded him into the storeroom. It was not as if she could claim any status at all. There had to be an easy way to discredit her and enhance his own popularity. The best way method would be to discover that she was doing something illegal.

The storeroom was small and quickly checked. Then he noticed a black safe in the corner. "Open that, please."

"No," Sara said. "I'm sorry, sir, but you have no authority to look in my safe. I can read the laws as easily as you enact them. Safes are sacrosanct."

"Madam! You will regret those words." Bramley made his voice loud and gruff, trying to sound like his distant cousins, who claimed they often ate people. He'd never even taken a bite out of one, for he hadn't been close enough to do so since he'd left his parents' home. He suddenly noticed Sara's soft, round arms and wondered if there was a chance he could learn. He wouldn't bite through the skin, though.

Sara gathered her strength and worked hard on looking less succulent.

Baby, the Rottweiler, had been nosing around the shelves but now he came to the safe. He began to whine.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Bramley. "There's something in that safe that shouldn't be there. And I won't be at all surprised if you are found to be timelegging!" What a coup that would be, to catch a witch actually selling time. She probably made it, too.

"According to scientists and philosophers," Sara said, "time is not real and therefore doesn't exist. It's only something we imagine. If that is true, no one has time, and therefore I can't possibly be selling it."

"Scientists and philosophers speak in the particular jargons of their disciplines and pretend to understand what they're saying to each other, but I don't believe it," said the mayor. "I've seen plants grow and clouds move across the sky."

To cover her surprise that an ogre could be even a tad poetic, Sara said, "But if time exists, perhaps it isn't important."

"Oh, it's extremely important," Bramley exclaimed. "Time must never be wasted or spent foolishly and that is why I have to make sure that no one gets more time than they were born with."

"I understand," Sara replied, "but that has nothing to do with me. I will not open the safe for you."

Bramley stood as tall as he could and sucked in his tummy. "In that case, I will call on the judge and in his own good time he will swear out a writ. If you don't open the safe for that, then I'll make sure you do time in the castle dungeon. And I will set a dragon to watch you." He turned on his heel and marched out of the store. The grandfather clock bonged a farewell.

Once Sara was sure the mayor had gone, she opened the safe and looked at her stock of time, wondering if there was any way she could disguise the small shiny envelopes. The five-minute quantities were packaged in blue, the ten-minute in purple, the fifteen-minute in green. The next three were red, yellow, and violet. The violet envelope contained forty-five minutes, which was the most anyone could swallow.

"Cast a glamor over the packages," croaked Spinnaker. "Bumblebutt wouldn't be able to see through that."

"Oh, I think he would," Sara said, with a sigh. "His powers and mine are roughly equal, you know."

"You could bury them in the back yard."

"But what would I do when someone comes in to buy time? Some people are desperate, and I'd have to dig up the packages and someone would be sure to see that and report me. Then I'd really be in trouble."

"What about making a pact with a devil?" Spinnaker rasped.

"Oh, dear!" Sara said. "I failed that section of the witchcraft course. And I don't know any devils, or where I could find one."

"Maybe Bumblebutt is a devil."

"No," Sara said, "he's just a lonely little man trying to be a big one. But he has the power to take my time and lock me in the tower." She began to feel angry. "Just like an ogre, to swallow my business so that no one benefits."

"In that case," said Spinnaker, "I suggest we skip town."

"A tempting idea," Sara replied, "but I would rather not. It may take the mayor several days to get that writ and, in the meantime, I can go on selling time to those who need it."

"It's your funeral, sweetheart."



It was a whole week before Bramley got his writ and could return to *Time to Read*. While he'd waited for the judge to sign the parchment, he put in some time asking people about dragons but nobody he asked had ever seen one. He supposed an ordinary human would do as a guard, but he'd had his heart set on a dragon, preferably a blue one with a bright, hot flame. It would enhance his reputation to have the only dragon in town.

He walked into the bookstore, waving the writ, while Spinnaker croaked a short, unintelligible word and the grandfather clock ticked a timely greeting. Suddenly Bramley held his hands to his head. A violent headache seemed about to explode his brain. Baby, the Rottweiler, whined and rubbed his head against Bramley's knee, nearly knocking him over.

"What's the trouble, sir?" asked Sara.

"Migraine," moaned Bramley. "It must have been that damn ticking."

"Sit in the reader's chair," Sara said. "I'll have water and a headache pill for you in no time." That was a lie, of course, for no event could happen so fast that it took no time at all. Even the shortest event took a nanosecond. But never mind, the spell she'd set on the clock recording had worked after all. Luck was with her; she hadn't done that one for a long time.

Bramley sat, holding his head. Too much stress, that's what it was. Waiting for the judge, looking for dragons, anticipating an arrest, polishing his chain of office. It was too much responsibility for one man. He must somehow make time to hire an assistant.

Meanwhile, Sara opened a purple envelope and poured the ten-minute crystals into a glass of water. She hurried back to the mayor. "Down that!" she ordered. "All of it."

He did so. Sara watched as his face relaxed, and he leaned back into the comfortable pillows. She poured more crystals into a dish of water for Baby. The dog drank it down and collapsed into a sound sleep at his master's feet.

Time out, Sara thought, and maybe the ogre will get out, too. She kept watching, while Bramley sat dreamily in the chair, staring into space as though it held everything he wanted. The dog snored.



At the end of the ten minutes, Bramley looked up at Sara. "The headache's gone!" He rose. "That's amazing. I've never had a headache tablet that worked so well." He pulled an old brass pocket watch from his vest pocket. "And so fast! Why, it didn't take more than a few seconds." He wound the watch, which always helped to calm his nerves. He'd already had it repaired four times because of overwinding.

"I'm glad I could help," Sara said.

"Where do you get those headache powders?"

She'd been afraid of that question. "I make them up myself, from an old recipe of my grandmother's. The powders have ingredients no ordinary person would think of."

Bramley chuckled. "Yes, of course, one has learned that witches use bat and toad and eye of newt. But I'm sure you didn't, for I'm equally sure I would have recognized the taste of such things." Belatedly, he remembered why he'd come to her bookstore. But it seemed mean to make her open her safe when she'd done him such a good turn. Still, he couldn't afford to lose face. Or time, either. He was, after all, a busy man.

"May I ask you a riddle?" Bramley said.

Sara crossed her fingers behind her back. "Of course."

"Think about the afternoon rush hour," Bramley said. "Time after time, cars are caught in traffic, engines running, exhaust fouling the air, drivers fidgeting over the loss of time. Tell me, what should the drivers do about those lost minutes?"

"Oh, but those minutes aren't lost," Sara said, "merely unused. Swearing at the traffic isn't proper use. Just waiting isn't proper use, either. Instead of waiting or cursing, the drivers should be meditating or, even better, conjugating Latin verbs."

Bramley blinked. This woman was clever as well as round and pleasing to look at. "Very good," he said. "Then I'll ask another. Scientists say time and space are one thing. Is that true?"

"I don't know," said Sara. "I'm not a scientist."

Well! She was honest, too. "I'll ask a third. Scientists also claim that time is circular. What do you say to that?"

Sara thought about that for a moment, while Bramley fidgeted. "I suppose it might be true," she said. "Sometimes things happen that I'm sure have happened before."

He felt sure now that she was time-legging. She knew too much about time for it to be anything else. Not to mention that he suspected she'd given him enough time to cure his migraine. "I'll think of another riddle," he said. But the thoughts going through his mind were telling him that a few extra minutes from time to time could be a very good thing.

"Miss Sapphira, would you care to go out to dinner with me?" Bramley clapped his hands over his mouth. How had those words got out?

But Sara was smiling at him. He'd asked that question right on cue. "I'd love to have dinner with you, Mr. Bumblebutt. I'm sure we'll have a delightful meal and, at the same time, a stimulating conversation."

Gradually, Bramley's heart slowed down to its normal rate. He began to think about all the ways Sara could be useful to him. In time, with proper training, she might be qualified to act as his new assistant. He would allow her to go on selling time and thus reap the eternal gratitude of all the townsfolk. He would be the most important person in Strawberry when the witch was his. There were bound to be many benefits from such a partnership. He congratulated himself on having the intelligence to recognize such potential, and decided he would call her his 'jewel.'

The arrangements for dinner having been made, Bramley Bumblebutt and Baby left the store and went on their way, while Sara watched from the front window. Before they reached the

corner, a cat crossed directly in front of Baby. The dog paid no attention. The cat, however, stopped and stared at him. It couldn't decide whether Baby was real or stuffed. The dog smelled real but acted stuffed. Tempting it to start a chase had been a waste of time.

"Excellent!" thought Sara. She would have no problem controlling the Rottweiler. Five minutes mixed up with his crunchies every day and he would be hers forever.

She turned to Spinnaker. "I'll take that time off you now. Was it very heavy?"

"The opposite," croaked the raven. "I had trouble not floating away. And I had the distinct impression that if I did float off the perch, I'd be going in circles."

Sara rummaged among his black plumage and carefully removed the Scotch tape that held her packets of time under his wing feathers. She put the packets back in the safe and locked it. She had let her stock dwindle in order to have less to hide, but she could remedy that without any trouble.

She picked up Bramley's unserved writ from the floor. It was a very pretty document, with the capital letters done in color and outlined in gold. Tonight, she would do a forgetting spell over it, then use it to start the fire in her cookstove.

"What's going to happen now?" Spinnaker croaked.

"What always happens," Sara said. "Bramley and I will get married and spend time happily ever after."

"So. And will you get change?"

"Of course not. If one is happy, one doesn't need change." Sara smiled. "I have decided that the mayor will refer to me as his 'jewel.' I rather like the idea of being a jewel."

"You already are," Spinnaker rasped. "The business has been saved and the townsfolk can go on treating themselves to little parcels of happiness. They'll have the time of their lives!"

"As soon as we are married," Sara said, "I will have the sign on the front window repainted. It will read, as it always should have, *Time to Go*."



## THE COFFEE GANG

"Senior coffee, one cream," I said to the woman at the cash register, just barely resisting the urge to go for an Egg McMuffin as well.

No one else was in the line-up, so I got my coffee fast and carried it to the first section of the restaurant. I slid onto the padded bench that marked the boundary between sections one and two and spread my belongings out on three tables to hold them for the rest of the gang. We've been coming for coffee after water-fit exercises at the rec center three times a week for so long now that our names should be engraved on that particular set of tables, but so far it hasn't happened.

Then I turned to check on who was sitting on the other side of the pony wall between me and the next section. Two weeks ago, when I was sitting in this same spot, some rotten little kid stood up in her booth, reached across the sill, and dumped half a glass of cold milk down my back. Maybe she'd wanted hot chocolate instead. I was itching to give her something, though it wasn't hot chocolate. However, that booth was empty, so I relaxed.

The first to come in were Nick and Nora. Nick went off to buy coffee and Nora sat next to me. "Hey, Ginny! Didn't you think the water was cold today?" Nora asked.

"Yeah, I stuck one foot in and wished I'd stayed under the hot shower."

"It got better," Nora said, "but maybe I just worked harder."

Next through the door were Morris and Cindy. Morris sat on my other side and put down a cookie tin. You're not supposed to bring food in, but we've tested more cookies and muffins at that row of tables than they sell at the front counter, and swapped more recipes than they do at Weight Watchers.

Right on their heels were Zelda and Scott, complete with backpacks. They like walking, those two, and the packs are handy for carrying groceries home from the store next door. Cookies and muffins, too.

"What's in the cookie tin, Morris?" I asked.

"Haven't a clue. Cindy handed it to me when we were getting out of the car."

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Since I'd had no breakfast and resisted the Egg McMuffin, I was dying to do a taste test.

"I don't want to do that, Ginny," Morris replied. "Cindy might have a story to go with them."

By this time, Tara and Bill, James and Jennifer, and then Riley had arrived, dropped keys or caps on the tables and gone off to buy their drinks. Frances and Derek were the last in, arguing as usual, though they aren't married to each other, or anybody else, for that matter.

"Hi, Ginny! Where's Harold?" Riley asked.

Harold is my husband, retired, as we all are, and loves to tell off-color jokes though sometimes I think he goes a little too far. "He had a doctor's appointment this morning and then he was going to Canadian Tire to look for paint."

"What's wrong with Harold?" James asked.

"He's still alive," I said. "No, don't tell him I said that. It's just a routine checkup, that's all."

By now, everybody had coffee or tea or those colorful, fruity concoctions with ice cubes that McDonald's dreams up.

Cindy opened the cookie tin and passed it to Tara, starting it around the group. "Chocolate coconut chews," she said. "It was my birthday yesterday."

"Oh, cool! How old were you?" asked Zelda, and then clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Sorry, I shouldn't ask personal questions."

"It's okay," Cindy said. "I was sixty-five."

"Congratulations!" Nick said. "Now you're eligible for the gold card and the old age pension. Welcome to the club!"

Jennifer smiled. "Wow! And you don't look a day over seventy!"

Cindy gave her a mock glare. "I'll get you for that!"

"I know you will," Jennifer said calmly. "I can't wait to see what you do this time."

James picked a piece of coconut out of his teeth. "These are fantastic. But I'll probably have to make another trip to Mexico to get more fillings."

"You're just looking for an excuse to get out of this rain," Tara said. "Can I have your recipe, Cindy?"

"Sure," said Cindy. "I'll put it on my iPad and email to all of you."

"Listen," I said, "I want to throw a surprise party for Harold. It's our fiftieth wedding anniversary two weeks from now and you're all invited. But I need help to get things organized and keep Harold from finding out."

"Fifty!" said Zelda. "That's an impressive number."

I guess it was, for her. She'll never make fifty years with Scott since she had at least two husbands before him. Not that anybody cares. Sometimes we argue, but we're pretty good at minding our own business.

"So where are you going to have the party?" Nick asked.

"At our house," I replied. "You've all been there before. There's lots of room for fifteen people, plus the couple next door. She's the one who makes the shortbread cookies I bring in around Christmas time."

"I don't know how you can turn down shortbread," James said, reaching for another chocolate coconut chew.

"I don't actually like it."

"I always figured there was something strange about you, Ginny." Jennifer grinned at me over the top of her latte.

I pulled the conversation back to my problem. "But for the party, you'll have to hide your cars down the block or whatever, so Harold doesn't accidentally see them."

Riley leaned forward so he could see around Frances, who tended to take up a lot of space. "I'll borrow my brother-in-law's new station wagon and pick up five more people, so that'll cut down on how many cars we need to hide."

"Would you like me to make a cake?" Cindy asked.

I'd been hoping and hoping she'd ask. She's a better cook than all the rest of us put together. "I'd love it, really, really love it."

I peeled the free coffee sticker off the side of the cup and pasted it onto the little card that comes on every paper cup, except in the fall when they have this silly Monopoly game. Two more stickers and I'd have seven, enough for a free coffee. "The thing is, though, once one of you shows up, he'll know it's a party. I'd like for him to walk in on the whole gang shouting 'surprise!'"

"How come he's not taking you out for a fancy dinner?" Tara said. "I mean, it is your fiftieth and all."

"That's going to be the day after, because he didn't phone for a reservation at the Bengal Room soon enough."

Derek cleared his throat. "Did you hear the one about the claustrophobic astronaut?"

Derek paused and everybody went silent.

"He just needed a little space."

The chorus of groans took longer than the joke.

Frances asked, "Exactly what day are you talking about, Ginny? I'm booked for a flight to Hawaii in roughly two weeks."

Harold and I don't travel in the winter because he likes to curl. I used to curl on his team, but not since my back started giving me trouble. "Hey, guys, Harold came up with a new joke yesterday. How do you keep Canadian bacon from curling in the pan?"

"I cut it in small pieces," Nick said.

"No, no," I said. "You take away its tiny brooms!"

More groans. "Trust Harold!" somebody said.

"Frances," I said, "our anniversary is on the tenth."

She consulted her cell. "Oh, that's okay, I'm not flying out till the twelfth. Would you like me to bring those butter tarts I made for our picnic last July?"

"This isn't meant to be a potluck," I said.

"Don't be silly," Tara said. "You won't be able to keep it a secret from Harold if you do all the cooking."

I didn't put up too much of a fight. Our potlucks are always terrific. "I really appreciate this, guys. That'll make it a great party. But how are we going to surprise Harold? He's not curling that day and he doesn't have plans for anything else."

"Not a problem," Morris said, "I'll phone him up say about four that day and tell him I read a Walmart ad that said Johnsonville brats are on sale. I'll offer to pick him up, since we live so close, because naturally we'll both want to stock up."

"But what if the sausages aren't on sale?"

Morris grinned. "I'll discover I got the date wrong and be really embarrassed. By the time we get back to the house, you guys should all be inside. Just make sure you're there before five. And I'll suggest I come in and have a beer before I head home."

"Perfect!" I said.

By the time an hour had passed, we'd settled on the rest of the menu and who was bringing what, looked at the new pictures of her grandchildren on Frances' phone, and learned that Riley was booked for cataract operations right after Christmas. Nora had promised to loan Jennifer her dehydrator, and the boys had indulged in a lot of nostalgia over the motorbikes they'd once driven.

I finished squishing the paper cups and plastic lids all into one big cup, ready for the garbage bin, and stacking the plastic trays we'd used. I like things neat and tidy, and I'd become such an expert squisher that nobody else bothered.

In my car, I made a list of who was coming to the party and what they were bringing. I was really happy about how things had worked out. My McDonald's support group always came through.



On the day of the surprise party, as soon as Morris and Harold had headed for Walmart, I moved the dining room table back against the wall, so it would serve as a buffet center, and set out silver, hot pads, and serving spoons. At four-thirty I was just heading upstairs to change out of my jeans when the phone rang.

It was Frances. "I've got a disaster here. I can't get my car to start."

Definitely a disaster. Frances was supposed to bring her signature baked salmon. "Maybe one of the others can pick you up."

"No," she said. "I already tried that. They've all left."

Well, they would have, of course. I'd said they should get to my house by quarter to five, since Morris and Harold were due back at five. "I can come and get you," I said, "but that's going to screw up the surprise because we'll never get back here by five."

Silence at the other end. "I think I can fix that," Frances said. "Morris has a cell phone. I'll call him and tell him to delay getting Harold back to the house until quarter after five."

"Good thinking! I'll be at your front gate in ten minutes." I grabbed my bag and car keys and flew down the front steps to the carport. As I backed out, my next-door neighbor appeared, carrying a casserole, and looking puzzled.

I stuck my head out the window. "Anna, you know where I hide the door key. Let yourself in. And everybody else, too." I turned onto the street and hit the gas.

Screeching to a halt at Frances's gate, I realized she was nowhere in sight. Maybe hung up on the phone or something. I jumped out of the car and hurried up her sidewalk. Fortunately, the front door was not locked.

I walked in the door and was instantly hit with what sounded like a hundred voices yelling, "Surprise!" Stunned, I stared around.

Frances's living room was full of people. Not only the McDonald's coffee gang, but some other friends and my two sons and their wives.

Harold popped out from behind the door and put his arms around me. "Happy anniversary, babe!" We had a long smooch, accompanied by cheers and Riley yelling, "Get a room! Get a room!"

The front door opened again, and I turned to see Anna, still carrying the casserole, as well as having my party dress over her arm.

"You knew!" I exclaimed.

"Of course, she knew," said Morris. "Harold was better prepared than you, Ginny. He got to us a week before you did!"

## THE SWIMMING POOL

Between classes,  
purling wavelets  
slide to rest,  
crystal clear  
to the blue bottom.

I float like a leaf,  
drift like a cloud,  
soft, silken water  
sliding over my skin.

Morning sun finds a  
high window loophole,  
brilliant light arrows  
into limpid blue,  
sparks a thousand rainbows  
in my eyelashes.

Neil Diamond sings *Cecelia*,  
new bodies whisper new wavelets,  
ripple the arrows,  
begin the game again.

## KILLING TIME

The rebellion began, not with secret plotters whispering in some dark, cramped basement and emailing one another in code, but as an ordinary domestic argument.

The clock in Gracie-Lou's blue and white kitchen read ten minutes to ten when Leon came in the back door and said, "Is it time for coffee yet?" He glanced at the clock. "Oh, hell, I'm ten minutes early. Well, I can go out and put the lawn mower away."

"Are you ready for coffee?" Gracie-Lou asked.

He frowned at her. "Well, sure I am, but the coffee isn't ready, right?"

"All I have to do is push the button," she said, "and it'll be done in about two minutes. Not enough time to put the lawn mower away."

"I don't like that," Leon said. "We start having coffee eight minutes early and that'll lead to something else, and pretty soon this whole place will be chaos." He went back outside.

At precisely ten seconds before ten o'clock, he came back in and sat at the kitchen table. Gracie-Lou set a mug of steaming coffee in front of him.

"Some cultures don't use clocks or calendars," she said.

Leon snorted. "Then they don't know anything."

"Why, yes, they do," Gracie-Lou said, stirring cream into her coffee. "They tell time by the sun, and they count the seasons to tell how many years have gone by."

"But that's stupid! They must be mental not to use inventions that make life easier. Hell, it's not just about life being easy. Clocks are essential."

"Inventions cost money, Leon. Calendars are made of paper. Clocks are made of metal. It takes work to produce those things and maybe we should be producing food instead."

"I don't know what's got into you," he said. "Time is everything. We have to have clocks! We have to know when to go to work and when to come home. We're at the age where we have to know when our next doctor appointment is. Kids have to know when to go to school and when to go out for recess."

"Some kids don't need to know that," Gracie-Lou said. "In fact, I've read about cultures where children find it hard to connect the numbers they see on a clock to the actual time of day. They so rarely use clocks that their lives aren't dominated by time."

"I don't know why you're so interested in backward countries when you live in the most progressive nation in the world."

"Would you like more coffee, Leon?"

He rose. "You know I never have a second cup. I'm going to trim the edges of the lawn and weed the vegetable garden." He slid his hand into the expansion bracelet of his watch, settled the timepiece on his wrist, and went out again.

Gracie-Lou sighed. Leon never wore his watch when mowing the lawn in case some speck of grass got into the works and made it stop. Then there'd be hell to pay, as he was fond of saying. But he wore it the rest of the time, even in the shower. She poured a second cup of coffee for herself and decided to call her sister in Alberta. She was fed up with breakfast at eight, lunch at twelve, and dinner at six, right to the minute, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, for all the forty-seven years she'd been married to Leon. He Mid-morning coffee had to be at ten, and afternoon coffee at three. If she couldn't get him to relax, at least she could complain about him.





Gracie-Lou's complaints struck a sympathetic chord in May's ears, and the grumbling expanded through the two provinces and then spread across the nation. Gracie-Lou read Twitter and Facebook and grew more astonished by the day. She couldn't believe she'd started something that caused so much talk. People began gathering to discuss the tyranny of living life according to what clocks said. Some of these people worked at the college in Gracie-Lou's town and, when they'd traced the beginnings of the argument to her, invited her to a meeting. They told her they were researching the concept of time.

"Listen to this," said a professor of history, "in the fifth century BCE in Greece, Antiphon the Sophist wrote that time was not a reality but only an idea or a measure. And Parmenides went further, claiming that time, motion, and change were all illusions. Then Zeno lectured on the paradoxes this statement engendered."

"That would be quite a pile of paradoxes," said another researcher, rolling his eyes. "Historians usually regard time as real, though there are different ways of looking at it. Patriarchies, such as Judeo-Christianity, prefer historic time because it's linear, phallic, and male, rather than the circular, elastic time found in mythology, which they regard as feminine. That's why we talk about the arrow of time."

One of the women in the group said, "But look at the snakelike language of the DNA helix, repeating itself endlessly, and twisting in curves back to the very beginnings of life. That's scientific, not mythological or feminine."

Gracie-Lou felt uncomfortable, for she knew nothing of philosophy and little of history. She knew what a paradox was, though, because she was married. Every woman knew you couldn't live with a man, and you couldn't live without one. Her complaint about clocks had been purely practical. Why let them run your life?

The first professor looked up from his notes. "Buddhism, which has been around for centuries, also says that time is an illusion. Even some modern physicists believe time is illusory."

Gracie-Lou protested. "Time is real. It must be. And all I wanted to do..."

But the leader of the group decided the discussion had gone too far into la-la land. "Time is power," he said. "Kings, governments and priesthoods have always used time to confirm their authority. Some say that the regulation of time is the primary function of all government." He paused, in order to emphasize his words. "Remember, the calendar is an ideological, political, and religious weapon."

Gracie-Lou slipped into her pale blue raincoat and left, discouraged. She wondered if the group would ever finish talking and actually do something. And the coffee they'd given her tasted like day-old dishwater.



Though aware that the discussion was flowing all the way around the world, Gracie-Lou and her sister continued talking about the possibilities of killing time.

"I've been thinking," Gracie-Lou said. "It's not just clocks we need to get rid of. Calendars have to go, too. People don't need to know how old they are. That's just something the government wants so they can keep track of us. In this country, we all have to have birth certificates, and what for?"

"Birth dates determine when we go to school," said May.

"They determine a whole bunch of stuff! When we can go to the bar, when we can drive a car, when we can get married, when we put on a uniform and go to war."

"Yes," May said, with a sigh. "And I bet a lot of people in the government spend their time juggling those numbers around to produce statistics."

"You know statistics lie," said Gracie-Lou, "and yet we pay for people to do them."

"Which allows the government to create a bunch more rules for us to follow. Or pay a fine. I mean, look at parking meters!"

"It's not just parking fines," Gracie-Lou said. "We pay for those birth certificates and drivers' licenses. And I spend way too much on calendars to give away to people at Christmas."

They paused to consider the implications of all that money being poured into keeping time. It would be so much simpler, not to mention cheaper, just to kill it.

Gracie-Lou had another idea. "Think of the billions of machines that tell us what time it is. Leon has two watches, one for everyday use and one for special outings. He's got a watch on his cell phone and another on the computer. And then there's the kitchen! Think how much stuff we could get rid of!"

"Oh, I know. I have a big wall clock in the kitchen so I can see the time without squinting at the one on the stove. There's another one on the coffeemaker and I'm pretty sure there's one on the rice cooker, though I've never used it."

"Well," Gracie-Lou said, "I suppose time would go on just the same whether we measured it or not."

"I suppose it would. So, there's no reason why we shouldn't just stop measuring it all the time." May laughed. "See? I just said, 'all the time.' We're always talking about time. Do you think killing it would stop that?"

"We'd have to bury it pretty deep."

They were silent for a little while, visualizing a grave that might have to reach to the center of the Earth.



Some people in the college group were a little less adamant about rebelling against time. "Look at nature," a biology teacher said. "Every living creature responds to the cycles of time. Animals and plants have internal clocks that keep their rhythms in sync with the environment. Time tells them when to bury nuts or hibernate or migrate. We can't get rid of that."

"They don't respond to time itself," objected one of her colleagues, "but to the seasons, using markers such as the amount of heat in the air and the amount of light available. You don't see trees and foxes wearing watches!"

The biology teacher shook her head. "But humans are also animals, and the human body responds to the rhythms of nature, those that rise and fall daily, such as heart rates, metabolism, and digestion. Also, some illnesses tend to hit at certain times of day, like heart attacks at around nine in the morning and asthma at midnight."

"But a 'day' is merely the pattern of light and darkness caused by the movement of the sun and has nothing to do with time. We can base our actions on the sun; we don't need clocks and watches."

"A 'day' means twenty-four hours, and that means time," the biology teacher said. "Depending on the season, there may be more light in a day, or more darkness."

"But," said her friend, "we have something like 100 billion nerve cells in the brain, which

give us our sense of self and our awareness of the world. The body doesn't need clocks or watches, any more than trees or foxes do."

"Does the brain make us aware of the passage of time?"

"Scientists can't prove there's any one part of the brain that deals with time. That alone makes me believe that we don't need manufactured clocks."

The biology teacher sighed. "Well, maybe not. But we organize everything we see, hear, and think according to time, whether it's past, present, or future. We indulge in a kind of mental time travel, and I say we need clocks to measure it."



Gracie-Lou sat with her sister in the living room. May had arrived for two weeks' vacation and Leon was discovering many urgent tasks in his workshop.

"The problem seems to be," said May, "that time is valuable."

"There's no way you can put a price on it, though."

"Yes, you can," the sister said. "Before Leon retired, didn't he work for so many dollars per hour?"

Gracie-Lou nodded and passed the plate of peanut butter cookies across to May. "I'd forgotten that. People are always saying, 'time is money.'"

"When I looked it up on my computer, it said that the business of time being money started around 1300 to 1400, after the dark ages, when double-entry bookkeeping was invented, and weights and measures got more precise. They've been sticking numbers on everything ever since."

"Yes, and we're always being told to use time carefully, because once it's gone, it's gone forever. Do you think, if we got rid of clocks and all the rest of it, we could just sit back and relax?"

"That would be nice," May said, taking another cookie. "Everything is moving way too fast now. Businesses want more profit, and the kids want more technology. Everybody wants everything faster."

"You're right." Gracie-Lou was silent for a moment. "But I notice nobody plays music at double the rate. Well, not the good old music we like, anyway."

Leon appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. "I been listening to you two and you're both nuts. Keeping track of time is normal. One of the first things you taught our kids was about time, especially when they had to go to bed."

"That was self-preservation," Gracie-Lou said. "Besides, it's just habit, teaching kids about time."

"No, it's not," Leon said, thumping his fist on the doorjamb. "If we didn't understand how time passes, we wouldn't do any planning, or build anything. We wouldn't have civilization."

"I disagree," said May. "Some cultures don't even talk about time. They recognize the seasons by the weather, which also tells them when to plant. Of course, they can tell when to harvest from the plants themselves. One tribe I read about never even talks about the future because it hasn't happened yet; it's not real."

"They're not a culture," Leon said. "They're just ignorant. It's very important to know what time it is, to know what's going to happen next."

"But all those things will keep on happening, even if there aren't any clocks." Gracie-Lou held out the plate of cookies toward Leon.

"You want to live in total confusion?" asked Leon. "I don't. And I'll tell you something I saw on Google. You guys aren't the only ones can look things up. If you think about the distance traveled by Earth during its orbit around the sun, August is about fifty million miles long. How about that for time measurement!"

The sisters sat there, looking at each other, and Leon went back to his workshop, pleased. Maybe he'd finally got the last word in on something.



The revolution finally fizzled out. The local college committee, which proposed to the town council that time should be killed, argued that nothing could change the past and the future was too uncertain to do more than guess at events based on those which had repeated themselves in the past, therefore it was pointless to measure the passage of time. They further argued that government should recognize humanity as part of the flow of time, that each person was a process, and that it was unnecessary to measure that process.

Measurement, responded the town council, was so valuable and so necessary to how everything functioned that its value couldn't even be calculated. They conceded that time was too slow for the impatient and too swift for those who were afraid, but agreed to pay for more psychiatrists to deal with such people.

Time went on as usual, though where it went, nobody knew.



Gracie-Lou's sister went home to Alberta. Though Leon objected vociferously, Gracie-Lou experimented with killing time in her own domain. She learned to judge when food was done by the way it smelled. She went to sleep when she was tired, and woke up when her body had had enough sleep.

"Are you hungry?" Grace would ask, when Leon came in for a meal. Her theory was that if you were hungry, you ate; if you weren't, you didn't. His theory was that hunger arrived at the precise times he'd always specified.

After her doctor refused to see her, when she arrived twenty minutes late for an appointment, and her best friend, Sarah, was annoyed when she arrived twenty minutes early for coffee and caught Sarah still in her dressing gown, Gracie-Lou quit trying. She gave up experimentation and went back to Leon's rigid routine.

Peace reigned in Gracie-Lou's house, but not in her mind. She was bound to that damned clock on the kitchen wall and the watch on Leon's wrist. If the government refused to kill time, she'd have to find a different solution.

There'd be hell to pay. But time to relax.

She'd kill Leon instead.



## TREE TRAVEL

Falling is not an option.

Falling means death.

Yet here I am, kneeling on a cliff some sixty or seventy feet above the ocean, shaking with terror. My sweat-slick hands clutch at the short section of metal railing which protects walkers on the trail from this dangerous part of the cliff. I don't dare look down for more than a second or two, for the depths call to me, and the serene, blue water coaxes my body to dive. When I feel myself leaning forward, yearning toward those sea-splashed rocks far below, I drag my gaze away.

Around me is a forest. Garry oaks and arbutus trees lean far out over the sheer drop to the ocean. Are they afraid of heights, afraid of falling, like me? Perhaps falling attracts them too, the way it does me, leaning over a bridge railing, hanging on like grim death, fearing grim death, but longing to answer the call of the water below.

Maybe the trees are merely curious about what's going on at the foot of the cliff, where sunlit waves lap against the sprawl of jagged rocks. Perhaps they lean down to listen to the waves, the murmuring of ducks, and the occasional slap of an otter's tail. Or, it may be that they're trying to reach the acorns and seeds dropped so far below, their lost drowned children.

I can see how the trees cling to the shallow soil with their roots, wrap them around the rocks, burrow into crevices. What do they feel when winter gales howl across the sea and their hold on the cliff loosens, or when the rains come and wash away soil?

I'm trying to heal myself of this fear, to learn how to live free of its stomach-clenching grip. I dream of doing something as simple as standing on a kitchen chair and changing a light bulb without my stomach cramping in terror if I happen to look down. The hour I've spent here feels like a week.

Do trees know about time? Do they know that time passes and that they will pass with it? Are they pleased to live so much longer than animals like me?

Bristlecone pines can live to 5,000 years or more. The oldest *Pinus longaeva* is more than that, making it the oldest known individual of any living species. They're small trees, these pines, no more than 20 feet high and, in the pictures I've seen, they look more like driftwood than a living tree.

In a North Wales village churchyard, there is a yew tree that's supposed to be at least 4,000 years old. The yew tree would have taken root sometime during Britain's Bronze Age. No creature should have to live through so much history, especially human history, which is always violent. Perhaps the trees don't notice.

There are clonal colonies, too, made up of genetically identical trees connected by a single root system, that are much older. There's such a colony in a National Forest, made up of more than 40,000 individual quaking aspen trees, which is thought to be 80,000 years old. This is so amazing that I can hardly comprehend it.

Rooted and unmoving, trees live slowly, traveling through the seasons, the years, the centuries, through more history than we can ever know. A philosopher said that it isn't time that passes, but ourselves, that time is always there. I don't know what that means.

I turn my head back to the rocks and water far below, and the butterflies in my stomach go mad. Apparently, science and philosophy do not help.

I'm not getting anywhere.

A friend suggested I try to make heights become so familiar that they no longer bother me. As a teenager, she was terrified of snakes. When a boy threw a garter snake at her and it wrapped itself around her waist, she passed out. But she couldn't stand being subject to such a weakness and decided to do something about it. She reasoned that a garter snake couldn't hurt her and therefore it was stupid to be afraid. She looked at pictures of snakes until they had no effect on her. She studied snakes and how they live. Then she looked at real snakes behind glass, over and over, until the sight of the reptiles stopped making her queasy. Finally, she was able to pick up a garter snake without fear and let it wrap itself around her arm or drape itself around her neck.

She told me that fear of snakes is the most common of all the phobias. A scientific theory says that such fear is a built-in reaction, vital for the survival of mammals since many snakes have deadly venom.

Penny's method doesn't sound difficult, though maybe she didn't tell me everything. Garter snakes may not be harmful, but falling 60 or 70 feet would be fatal. I just want to be able to climb ladders. But mountains, too, maybe. I want to stand on the moon and look down to Earth, without being afraid I'm going to fall through space and disintegrate in an ocean. I want to stand on a kitchen chair and be able to look down from that dizzying height without muscle-weakening terror.

Would climbing a tree work? The lowest branches of the Garry oak behind me are within reach, and so many more that a person might be able to climb right to the top of the tree. I don't think that person is me, but I'm going to try. I get to my feet, face turned away from the rocks below, let go of the metal railing, wipe my wet hands on my jeans, and walk to the oak. I put my hands around a branch just above my head, brace my feet on the trunk, and hoist myself onto it. The ridged bark is rough under my hands and easy to grip. When my feet are solidly placed on it, I look down at the ground.

I feel dizzy.

It would be all right if I could be on the inside of the tree, not on the outside. But that's wishful thinking. If I can actually make it to the top—and this oak looks to be at least eighty feet high—how will I ever get down?

It's impossible. If I get to the top of the tree and look down, I will fall.

What does it feel like to be an oak? Large and solid, I suppose. Quiet. The oak must be happy if its roots go very deep, so deep that no wind could ever blow it down. And they say oaks are like that. Does it know?

Maybe it knows. A tree is not just a simple thing of trunk, branches, and leaves. It's a miniature city, really, with transportation lines for food and sewage and thousands of small factories producing chlorophyll. It lives and breathes, feeds and grows. It knows how to make food and medicine from light and water. It's wiser than me.

That thought sends me up to the next higher branch.

I wish I could change myself to live inside a tree. But I couldn't even change into a squirrel, though that would be the perfect solution. There are two fat gray squirrels in the neighboring arbutus, chasing each other up and down the trunk and along the branches out to the very ends. When a branch bends under the squirrel's weight, it simply drops to the next branch down, or even leaps into another tree. I've never seen one fall.

Now I'm up to the fifth branch. Looking down isn't so bad now, because the ground is almost invisible beneath the network of branches and leaves, but my stomach still ties itself in knots. Smaller knots, though. Is that because I can't see much of the ground? Is the fear of heights just a habit of eyesight, or is it a habit of thought?

The squirrels are scolding something, and it makes me think of how they bounce from branch to branch. But maybe it's the branches throwing them up and down. Maybe the branches will throw me back and forth, like I'm the ball in a game of tennis. I imagine the branch I'm standing on suddenly throwing me up to another branch and my palms are sweating again, making even the rough, ridged bark slippery. That higher branch might throw me back down again. Suppose I miss?

I have to stop this. I'm here to climb a tree, that's all.

The oak wouldn't want me to climb right inside it. That would seem like an invasion. I can feel the tree thinking that thought, even as I imagine myself inside it. Science doesn't say so, but I could be right that trees think, though they must think very slowly. Does this tree want me to go on climbing? I don't sense any answer, so I climb up another three branches.

I'm committed now. A strong shudder shakes my body. I'm up this tree and I have no idea how I'm going to get down. Maybe I'll become part of the tree, a skeleton with wood and bark growing around it. Maybe, two hundred years from now, I'll get blown down in a storm.

But, if I became part of this tree, I could take food from sun, air, rain, and earth. Chlorophyll is the one link between the sun and life. Plants make it and the rest of the world has to eat them to get it. Trees are lucky to be self-sufficient, needing only what they already have. If I were a tree, I could grow tall and independent and fearless.

I become a Garry oak, and I grow and grow, until finally I'm among the branches in the crown. I can't grow any more because the top branches aren't strong enough. My legs and arms are tired, the muscles quivering with effort. I know that I can't hang on much longer and that fear curses me with more weakness.

I will fall. I don't know how I can stop.

Lie down, says the tree.

I put my arms around the trunk and stretch the rest of my body out on the branch, my legs hooked around it. Gradually I relax, inch by inch, muscle by muscle. I begin to feel that I could stay here for a while and not think about anything.

Sometimes it's fun to think, though. And sometimes it's fun to move, which the tree can't do. It's not fun to be afraid, though. The lucky squirrels aren't afraid; they just live their lives.

In myth, the other animals are said to be the old-timers on earth and the ancestors of humans. We are the younger brothers. Which, of course, is true because this is how our species evolved. I can hear the squirrels, far below me, chattering at each other. Perhaps we humans have evolved a bit too far.

I know I have climbed too high.

But not everyone is ruled by fear. As long as I can lie on this branch and refuse to think about climbing up or falling down, I won't be afraid.

Just thinking that thought brings the fear back. It washes through me, from head to feet, and raises sweat on my palms. Under my arms, it forms into droplets, which slide over my skin, leaving a cool, damp trail.

Fear is like time, surprising and confusing. I can't see either one, so I can't capture them, can't control them. They seem to be intimate parts of me, yet untouchable. They are like wind in the grass.

I imagine fear as a separate entity, something that does not belong to me, and slowly my sweat evaporates and I'm breathing evenly again.

I have two choices. I can climb down this oak or stay on my branch and starve to death. But I'll fall long before starvation brings death. There is no choice, really. Falling is a risk, whether

I'm alive or half-dead.

With my arms still around the trunk, gripping it with all my strength, I unhook my legs and let go of the branch. My legs swing downward and there is that sudden sickening clutch of stomach muscles. I grit my teeth. Then I realize my ankles are banging against the branch I was on before. I lift one foot up, then the other, and I'm standing on the branch. Slowly, I take one arm away from the trunk, and put it around again, lower down. Then the other arm.

I've climbed down one whole branch! I'm so happy that I nearly let go of the trunk, and the realization of where that would send me has my body trembling with fear again.

It's not that I haven't learned all I can about this phobia. The fear of falling is a combination of anxieties around the sensation itself and the possibly dangerous effects. It's wise to be afraid of falling and take precautions. But I don't have a head for heights, either, so my irrational fear of looking down is another phobia, which brings panic.

The psych text said that a fear of falling, along with a fear of loud noises, is one of the most common inborn fears. Like snakes, I guess. A fear of heights evolved as an adaptation to a world where falls posed a significant danger.

That last statement made me laugh. Falls still "pose a significant danger." The world hasn't changed. There are a thousand ways of falling to one's death. And humans haven't changed. Not much, anyway. So, some of us are afraid of heights when we don't have to be. Most of us don't live in trees anymore.

The feeling of panic has subsided and it's time to move again. I can't remember where the next branch is, though. It could be to the right, or the left, or directly below me. Part of the fear is being unable to trust my sense of balance. Which means that I must look down to locate my next step.

Surprisingly, looking down isn't that bad. I can't see the ground at all, just branches and leaves. The branch I want is directly below me, and I step down to it cautiously, making sure I still have a death grip on the trunk. It feels so good to accomplish this small step, that I manage another three before the fear overtakes me again.

Lie down, the tree says.

This tree is smart. Any being that can live 4,000 years, compared to my paltry possible 80 or 85, must know what it's doing, how to live its life. I lie along a branch. The branches are getting bigger, which means they're easier to balance on. But harder to lock my legs around.

While I'm resting, I think about my urge to jump from the top of the cliff into the water. Or onto the rocks. Maybe that's frightening because it's possible for me to do it, to yield to the panic and willingly jump. Maybe the water seems safer than standing on the cliff.

Yes, that's it. If I'm in the water, I'm on the level; there are no heights below me. No, wait a minute, there are depths below me.

Another philosopher says that, though the void seems to beckon us, it is really our own freedom that beckons us.

Freedom? Freedom to fly through the air?

But that won't work. I'm not a bird.

I'm calm again. Maybe thinking helps. Or maybe the tree is sending me vibes. I'm fond of it now, even though it may be deciding whether or not to kill me. This time I manage to climb down a half dozen branches before my heart palpitations and shaky knees force me to stop. Danger gives some people a high. I'd be so grateful if I could react that way.

I'm almost halfway down this oak and I'm having moments of dizzy joy. I'm thinking now that it was almost easy climbing up because I didn't have to look down. Climbing down is hard,



but I'm doing it!

When I reach two-thirds of the way down, I can see the ground again. I don't want to look at it, but I must.

The psych text said that fear of heights is caused by "cognitive dissonance." That's a ten-dollar phrase, but it seems right. The theory goes like this: you look over a cliff and get a sense of vertigo, then you feel off balance and your body tries to 'right' itself. This confuses your brain because there's no immediate danger. You're not actually falling, so why is your body trying to adjust itself and sending all those signals? Your brain makes the only possible conclusion: you must want to jump.

Stupid brain! This oak tree is way smarter than you are.

I look down at the ground, which seems very far away below the intervening leaves and branches. My stomach is in a knot. I keep looking, keep telling myself that if I climbed up, then I can climb down. Gradually the knot loosens enough that I register what else my eyes are telling me. The next branch is only two feet away. That knowledge carries me down another couple of branches.

Finally, I'm only twenty feet above the ground, give or take. That's not very far; that's less than four times my height. But logic fails me again and my hands sweat. This time I try something else. I look up the trunk of this very tall oak and I know that I climbed all the way to the top, and that I climbed back down three quarters of the way.

Lie down, the tree says.

Why can't I remember its advice?

I rest. I talk logic to myself, then wish somebody would come and rescue me. But I didn't tell anybody where I was going. They might have laughed.

Stupid brain! Stupid pride.

I take a deep breath and go down three more branches.

I can jump now; the ground is only two feet away.

I collapse on the ground and lean back against the trunk of the oak. I am so exhausted that I can't believe I'll ever move again. I lie there for a long time, wanting to hug the tree, wanting it to hug me. But it helped me get down, so it's already given me the oak version of a hug.

Perhaps an hour passes. An hour out of twenty-four is not very significant to me, and it has no meaning whatsoever for the tree. An hour to me is probably like a billionth of a second to the oak.

I get to my feet and slowly walk over to the cliff. I rest my hands on the metal railing. I'm not so foolish as to try looking down with no protection at all.

Then I do look down. I don't want to jump. I want to spread my wings and fly, drift down gently and perch on the water. The idea is tantalizing.

But I have no wings. I'd probably hit the rocks, not the water. Anyway, what does it matter? They're both hard when you fall from this height.

My hands are sweaty, but not quite so much as they were. The muscles in my stomach are clenching just a little less now.

How many oaks will I have to climb before the fear goes away entirely? How many ladders? How many kitchen chairs?

I walk back to the oak and lay my hand on the trunk. The Earth feels warm and solid under my feet, and I don't want to leave her again. But I will. I want the oak to teach me what it knows about living, how it can grow so tall and have no fear of falling.

## FLYING

Steel bird,  
wide-winged,  
lifts off,  
soars with the wind,  
one bright eye following  
a silver thread of river  
dreaming green valley fields,  
seas of dry brown hills.

Night erases the river,  
shrinks the world  
to a crowded cabin,  
thick with snoring, sighing,  
whispering, murmuring,  
pages rustling, feet tiptoeing,  
engine rumble,  
silence.

I dream the sun explodes  
and the world freezes.  
I dream we fall out of the sky  
and break through the ice.

Sunrise happens after all,  
brings empty blue sky above,  
white cumulus clouds below,  
horizon to horizon.

We are all that's left,  
flying forever.

###

## Books by Lea Tassie

Tour Into Danger

Cats in Clover

Siamese Summers

Cat Under Cover

Cats & Crayons

Calico Cat Caper

Charger the Soldier

Charger the Weapon

Charger the God

The Missing Year

The Case of the Copycat Killer

Deception Bay

Deep Water

Dire Straits

Green Blood Rising

Red Blood Falling

Shockwave

A Clear Eye

Double Image

Eyes Like a Hawk

Harvest

Walking the Windsong

Connections

Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail

Baa Baa Black Sheep, Have You Any Words?

## About this book

The 17 stories and 10 poems in this book contain a touch of mystery, a touch of fantasy, a touch of science fiction and more than a touch of humor. At the same time, some of these timeless stories touch, in timely fashion, on how people make time, keep time, and put in time. In no time at all, you'll be reading about wasting time, killing time, passing time, and having the time of your life. After that, whether you're having time out, or doing time, you'll never be behind the times. But do read the two cat stories, too; cats are sensible people who don't care about clocks unless it's tuna time.

## Author Bio

Lea Tassie grew up on an isolated homestead in northern British Columbia. Now she lives and writes in the beautiful, temperate, Pacific Coast rainforest. Her fiction includes cat humor, science fiction, and mainstream novels. Her non-fiction deals in a light-hearted way with the weird words and phrases found in the English language.

